"Two on the Mate" — RICHARD HOWELLS WATKINS

"Foreclosure on Halfaday", J. B. HENDRYX — "Nine Men with Bats", MALCOLM MURCHIE

Short Stories

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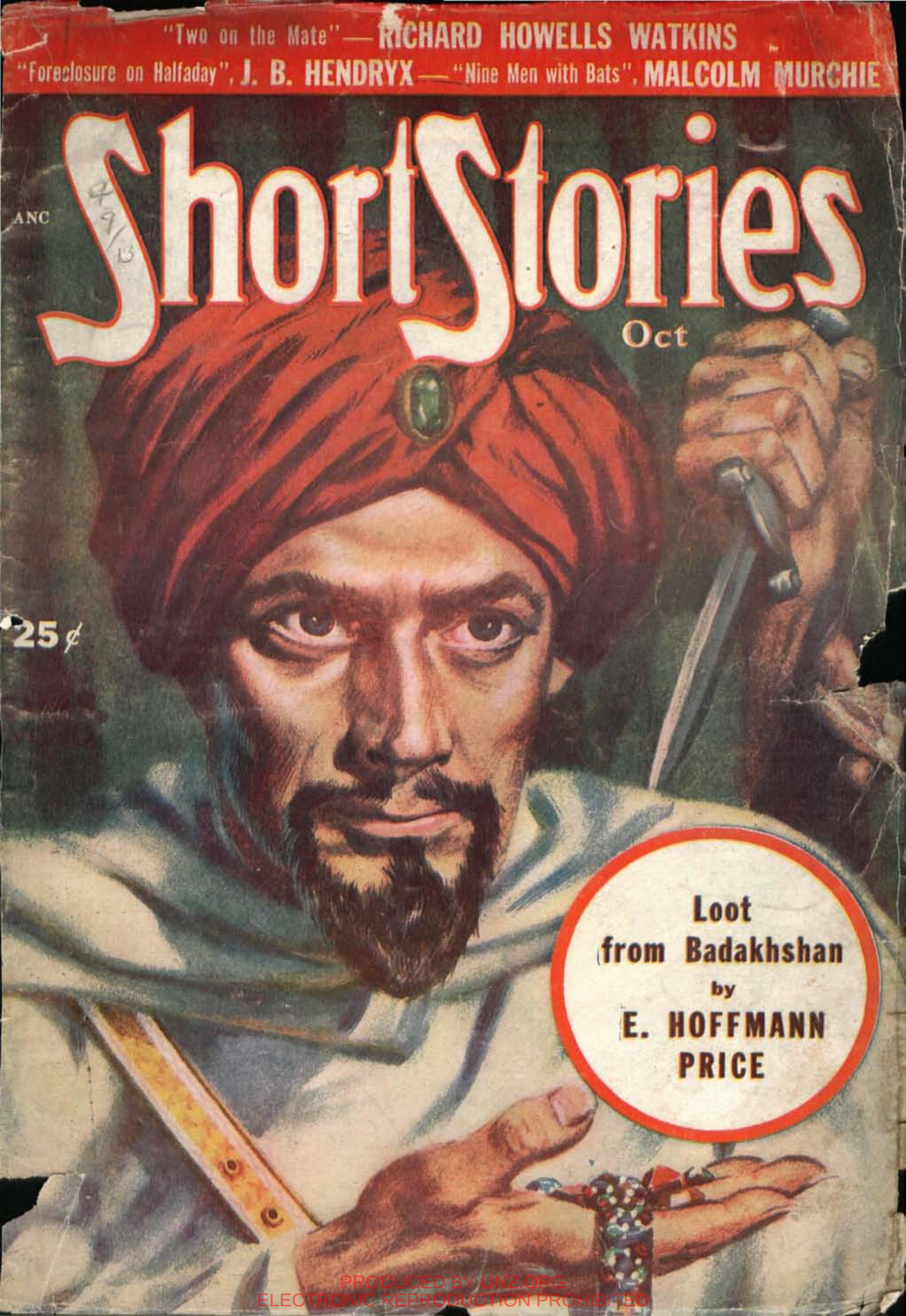

Loot from Badakhshan

by

E. HOFFMANN PRICE

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Meet HUMPTY-DUMPTY!

Will this first date be the beginning of a beautiful romance with the cutest starlet from Hollywood? It ought to be . . . but it isn't going to work out that way. Humpty-dumpty is in for the fall of his life. By half-past ten he will be in so bad he'll never get another date. And he won't know why*.

It could happen to you—to any man—who is careless about halitosis (unpleasant breath)*.

So, never, never risk offending. Don't trust to momentary makeshifts. Use Listerine Antiseptic, the *extra-careful* precaution which instantly sweetens and freshens the breath . . . helps keep it that way, too . . . not for seconds . . . not for minutes . . . but for hours, usually.

While some cases of halitosis are of systemic origin, most cases, say some authorities, are due to the bacterial fermentation of tiny food particles clinging to mouth surfaces. Listerine Antiseptic quickly halts such fermentation, then overcomes the odors fermentation causes.

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the *extra-careful* precaution against bad breath . . . LISTERINE ANTISEPTIC

Memo: Next time you see flakes and scales, start with Listerine Antiseptic and massage—quick . . . it's a wonderful aid for **INFECTIOUS DANDRUFF**

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The Story Tellers' Circle

Young MacDonald Off the Farm

IN OUR last issue we introduced to our readers a somewhat laconic young man whose job was the insurance business, but whose fate seemed to lead him into lead punctuated episodes. He was R. W. Daly's Henry MacDonald, and in "Know Your Sport" in this SHORT STORIES, Henry once more finds himself unwillingly, unwittingly, but not unworthily in the middle of a mess.

When the first MacDonald story came our way, we liked it; it seemed a welcome change from the high tension crime yarns we read so often, and we liked the characters of the men—not to mention gal—who figured in the picture. Heretofore we had only seen Daly's sea stories, and we were intrigued by his change of scene into the rural areas and crime therein—so we bought the story. There are more to come, we are glad to say, and meanwhile here is a word from Daly himself about the MacDonald stories:

"MacDonald has a real-life prototype who has yet to be shot at—that is since severing relations with an Armored Division—but who has at least seen a knife flourished in argumentative support. He isn't the brightest guy in the world. He's a likable, steady husky American born to be a blocking back or in the infantry. When he has thought a thing through, MacDonald has the beef to do something that will count. He became an insurance adjuster because he lacks the temperament to be an insurance salesman.

"Frank Hawkins, the sheriff, is really two pilots rolled into one to avoid libel. One is a hot Navy pilot with more guts than imagination, who was knocked down by Zeros until Uncle Sam came through with the Hellcat and semi-social security. The other is a Marine pilot who was born with a built-in electronic gunsight for deflection shooting. Both are small in size, fast in reflexes, and both have the airman's characteristic modesty.

"MacDonald is meant to be the foil for his friend Hawkins, but every so often MacDonald just up and runs away with the story.

"The town of Burlington, Wisconsin, is more or less the setting for the yarns, with liberties taken with its precise geographical location and specific characteristics. For fifteen summers, I enjoyed its hilly woodland surroundings, and now that it's necessary to work for a living, often look back at Wisconsin as paradise. MacDonald has been urging me to get a job in Madison.

"Bob Daly."

Bush Miles

JIM HENDRYX of the Halfaday Creek stories spends his summers in Thessalon, Ontario, where the fishing is good, and when one of the SHORT STORIES editors was going west by CPR recently, he looked at the map and wrote Jim that he had been somewhere in his neighborhood—Chapleau seeming to be the station nearest the north shore of Lake Superior in the region of Thessalon. To which Jim replied, "Well, Chapleau is about a hundred miles or so from Thessalon, but why didn't you drop in? What's a hundred miles or so with no roads among friends?" We really don't know, but a hundred miles or a hundred thousand dollars or a hundred canny remarks seem to mean very little to that hardy traveller, Black John Smith, Halfaday Creek, Y. T., Canada. But that *is* a long way from Thessalon; we *do* know that.

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Short Stories

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EDITOR
D. McILWRAITH

October, 1949

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EVERY AUTHOR'S FINEST AND LATEST STORIES NO REPRINTS

Except for personal experiences the contents of this magazine is fiction. Any use of the name of any living person or reference to actual events is purely coincidental.

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THE SHOOTER'S CORNER

CONDUCTED BY PETE KUHLHOFF

So You Want to Be An Antique Gun Dealer!

DURING the past ten years I have received letters from well over a hundred individuals who wanted to go into the antique gun business. The majority inquired about books and catalogs on the subject, so it was apparent that many knew nothing or practically nothing about old guns. Out of this group I doubt if more than one or two could make a go of it, without a large financial backing.

It so happens that many (practically all) dealers in old firearms are collectors of many years' experience; even with their years of experience behind them it is not unusual for one to get stuck or at least pay more for a piece than it is worth. So what chance has a rank beginner in a business where competition is keen and trading as sharp as that of "horse traders" in olden times?

Strange as it may seem, rareness of an item does not necessarily make it particularly valuable. For example, there are plenty of handguns that are harder to find than Patterson Colts, but there certainly are not many that command a higher price.

Glamor seems to have a lot to do with the desirability of a firearm. A very popular revolver is the Colt Single Action Army, popularly called the "Frontier" or "Peacemaker." It was produced up until just before the late war. It sold, brand new for around $35. Now they are listed in dealer's catalogs for from $45 to $150 or more, depending on condition and accessories.

This morning an antique dealer dropped in with a cardboard box containing fourteen old handguns he had bought for $40. Now that sounds like it would be a good buy, and he was anxious to find out what price they would bring. I looked them over and found that six of the pieces were strictly junk, worth not more than about three dollars apiece retail. Three were pinfires in poor condition, worth about five dollars apiece. The others might bring ten dollars apiece over a period of time. In other words, if he is lucky he can sell the lot for $75. Now a dealer who handles ordinary collectors' pieces has to figure on paying out not more than 50% of what he can get for an item just to make expenses, and if he wants to make a profit he can't pay more than about 33 1/3% retail value for an old gun. So, my friend didn't do so well on the box of guns!

Another thing that is a headache for the gun dealer is the counterfeiter. When a certain kind of old gun becomes popular and the price goes up into real money there are certain characters who delight in making up phonies, just to see if they can pass them off on an unsuspecting dealer and pick up a wad of greenstuff. Generally these birds are good craftsmen and no doubt could make more money by putting their skill to legitimate uses. Fortunately, it is so difficult to fake rare guns that very few show up, yet I have seen phony parapet guns pass for the real thing. I have seen fake Kentucky pistols, and so on. The last faked gun that I have examined was a Dance Brothers (confederate) cap and ball re-

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volver. This gun was undoubtedly made up of Colt cap and ball revolver parts.

Incidentally, the Dance Brothers revolver is quite a rare item and much desired by collectors. There were probably no more than 324 made and there are only twenty known to be in existence. Of course, more may turn up, which is what makes this gun game so interesting.

As long as the Dance Brothers revolvers have come up in the conversation, I'd just as well go ahead and mention the known facts about these little known handguns.

In 1862 the Dance Brothers, James, David and George were producing farm implements in their shop located near Cedar Break, a short distance from the Gulf of Mexico, on the Brazos River. Firearms were scarce and in great demand in Texas at that time, so the Dance Brothers started producing cap and ball (percussion) revolvers.

These revolvers appear to have been made in three different models. The larger (Dragoon) .44 caliber size in two models, both with eight-inch barrels, one round and the other full octagonal in shape. The latter was the real piece de resistance! The other model was smaller in size and of .36 caliber.

The Dance Brothers revolvers are somewhat similar to those made during that period by the Colt people, but may be recognized by the absence of the recoil shield on the sides of the frame behind the cylinder. If you uncover one of these old guns you really have something!

To get back to the business of dealing in antique guns. It is a terrific chore to get together enough specimens to warrant getting out a catalog which incidentally costs a lot of dough. So many dealers get out "lists," which may be from one to a dozen pages with the items, that are for sale, listed and numbered.

Another point is that of capital invested. Say a dealer has a thousand guns listed in his catalog. That could easily mean he has $25,000 tied up, and he has to have a little cash on hand for operating expenses. Brother that ain't hay, especially to poor characters like many of us!

Also, as with all luxury items, there is bound to be uncertainty as far as sales are concerned, which makes the antique gun business somewhat of a gamble, generally speaking.

Nope, I for one, can't afford to be in the antique gun business, but, believe me, I'd certainly enjoy it!

Book for the Cartridge Collector

TWO fellows who hang their hats out in Cleveland, Ohio, have probably done more research in the field of ballistics than any other two private individuals.

H. P. White and B. D. Munhall have been at it a long time and over a period of years have accumulated an assortment of precision instruments (to say nothing of a catalogued collection of over 12,000 cartridges) seldom found outside of a government arsenal or technical institute.

Besides their extensive ballistic work they have managed to plan a series of books that will contain practically all information known about cartridges.

For several months I have been studying Volume I which covers Centerfire Metric Pistol and Revolver Cartridges. This book, as will others of the series, contains actual size silhouettes as well as all pertinent dimensions and other information about the cartridges listed.

Munhall and White have gone to infinite pains to include every probable fact (taking nothing for granted, they weighed, measured, fired and photographed all cartridges available) about the cartridge catalogued in the first volume.

This and future volumes will be of invaluable aid to the shooter, cartridge collector, ballistician, identification specialist and dealer in obtaining authoratative information on cartridges.

Centerfire Metric Pistol and Revolver Cartridges, Vol. I of Cartridge Identification has been published by the Infantry Journal Press, Washington 6, D. C., at $7.50 per copy.

I certainly hope that White and Munhall keep busy and hurry along the future volumes!

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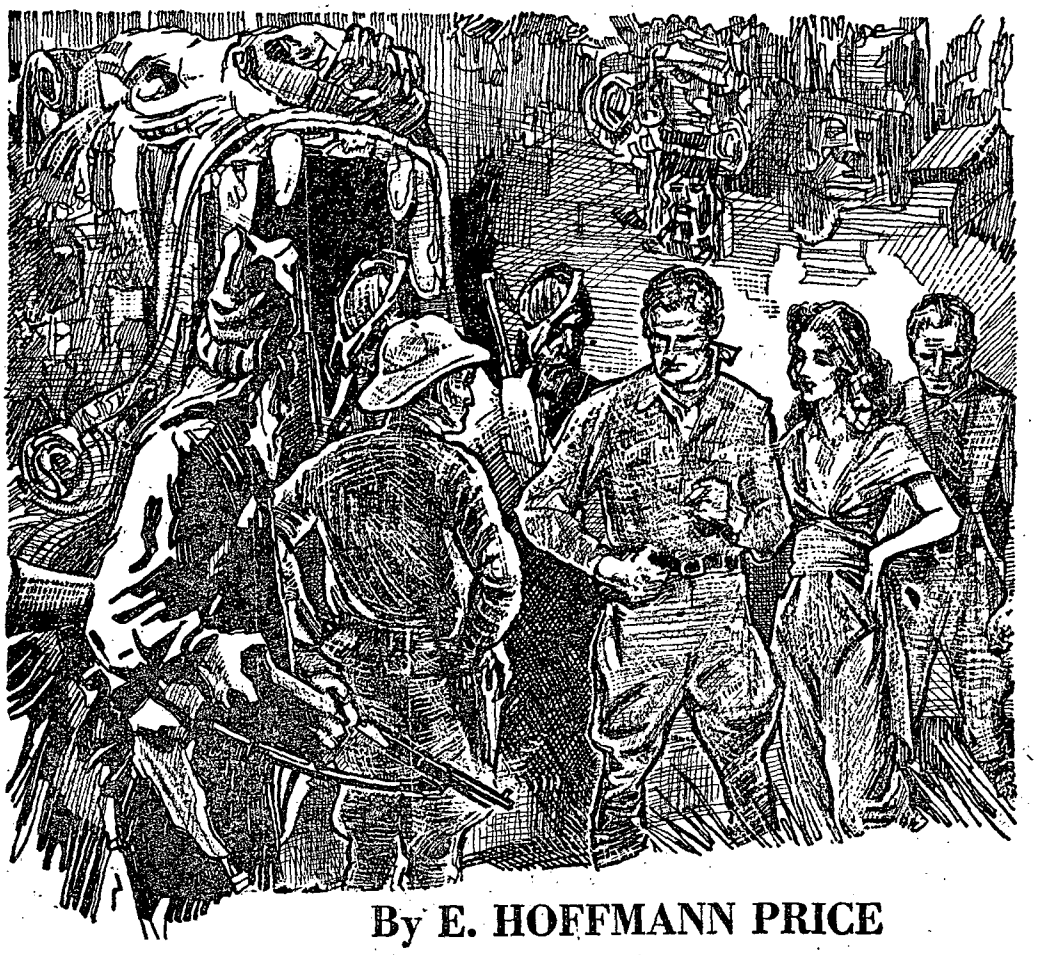
LOOT FROM BADAKHSHAN



By E. HOFFMANN PRICE

I

STEVE DAGGETT'S mud-walled courtyard was jammed with camels, with donkeys, and with the bearded merchants who had driven them down to Kabul. Until he had time to deal with the traders, they camped there with their goods, and smoked their long-stemmed *chibouks* and bubbling *kalians,* and made tea. Lucky they were not in a hurry; otherwise, they would go to Magnus Reimer's Atlas Trading Company. Daggett's competitor always had goods on hand.

Whereas for awhile Daggett had given Atlas some crisp competition, he was now at the receiving end, and long-nosed Magnus Reimer had begun to smile again. Daggett, meanwhile, reserved more and more for his own use the aspirin he had imported for the Kabul trade.

A thin-faced Englishman wearing a bulldog pipe, a closely cropped mustache, and an unhuman air of aloofness leavened by a trace of general disapproval, poked about the dusty store room of the building which made one end of the compound. Colonel Eustace Peale ignored the dried apricots and the dried mulberries. Likewise, he ignored the temperature, which was more than high enough to make the most of the stench of asafoetida, the reek of rawhides, the goaty tang of wool, and the rancid rankness of tallow. With his silver-mounted stick, he poked a Turkoman carpet, thick and compactly woven. Its ground was oxblood, its

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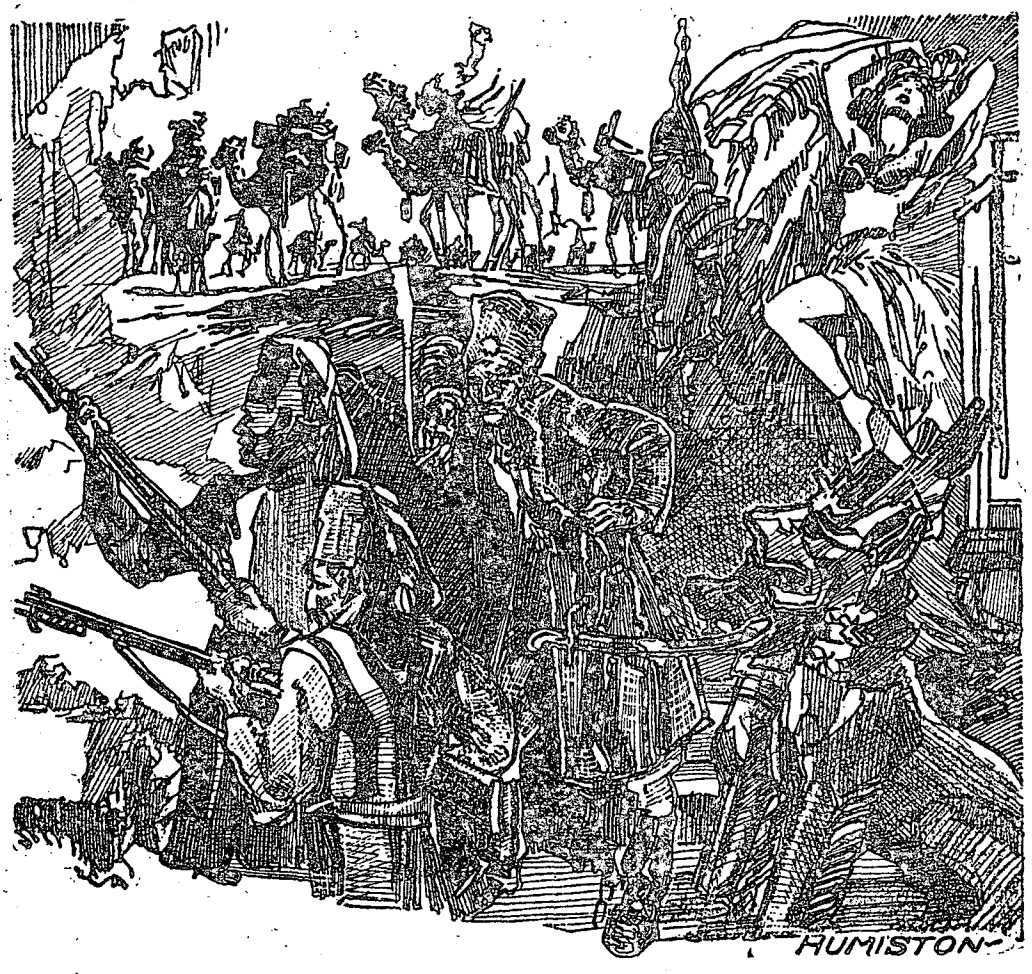
"Leave Him Who Has Offended You in the Hands of Time, for Time and Fortune Will Avenge You."



pattern a treble column of eight-sided medallions in blue and white.

"Wretched, Steve, wretched," the colonel complained, as though to himself. "Commonplace. Hmmm—nothing odd or curious."

Daggett came from the office where a Hindu clerk made entries, largely in red ink. He was tall, and craggy faced, and had a stubborn jaw, though the weary slump of his shoulders betrayed him.

"Big oddity," he said, "is your pretending you don't know that's the best Boukhara carpet you've seen in years." He twisted nimbly in and out among bales and hampers to get at a pigeon-holed locker. "Look at these, Colonel, they're lousy, too."

Peale polished his horn-rimmed glasses and sucked noisily at his pipe. Though in mufti, he was nevertheless entirely regimental, from the Peshawar Lancers pipe mixture which gave him immunity to the odors of merchandise, to the brandy whose bouquet he always exhaled. He still had left at least ten cases of tawny port, with the crest of the now disbanded Lancers blown into the shoulder of each bottle. However, Peale was more than a professional *pukka sahib*. His bleak blue eyes probed every corner of every bazaar. He collected things, and he wrote monographs.

Peale had left Burma for reasons other than his health, and without any rubies. So Daggett dug out a small parcel tied in a twist of calico. They were dulled by centuries of having been tumbled about in river sands.

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Their deep red was as though seen through frosted glass, except for a few which had escaped erosion and thus had clean, sharp edges, six-sided crystalline forms.

"Trash," Peale muttered, as he studied each gem with a jeweler's glass. "Too big for the abrasives trade, and not good enough for anything else. You'd think the lazy beggars'd trace the lode they come from."

"Some coins, Colonel."

Peale glanced at the lot which had come from one of the many ruins which dotted Afghanistan. They might date back to Alexander the Great, or they might be as recent as Kanishka, the Graeco-Buddhist king who had once ruled all the land from Kabul to Peshawar. He shrugged, and said, "I say, come to my quarters. Let me show *you* something."

"What?"

Thrusting his head forward, turtlewise, the colonel said in an extremely confidential whisper, "Ibn Battuta's original manuscript."

"Who the hell's *he?*"

"Arab chap. Great traveler, circa 1350 A. D. This has the missing pages, do you understand?"

"Sure," Daggett answered, cheerily. "Lost shall be found."

"Er—you don't understand. He describes his route through Badakhshan to Kabul. Only known manuscript of his works that does so. There is a hiatus in every other copy extant. Clue to the lost city of Qizil Khoja. Lock up your blasted factory and guide me up that way. We'll excavate enough artifacts and all that sort of thing to pay you many times over."

"Colonel, if I had your retirement pay, I might be tempted. And right now I spend more for red ink than for groceries. But to hell with archeology; see that Frenchman, that's his meat."

"But you were with that geological survey," Peale persisted, as though he had not heard the rebuff. "You know the governor and the *hakim,* ah— Yar Ali Khan, I believe."

DAGGETT glanced at his watch. Escape tempted him sorely. "Regimental brandy, or no dice! First I have to stop at the customs house to lick some bureaucratic boots—now, *if* that shipment has come through, and if nothing's fouled up, I may be able to take care of my customers."

They went in Daggett's fourwheel drive truck; the colonel's pony cart had no difficulty in trailing after. The streets, so narrow that overhanging balconies on each side made a canopy, were jammed with camels, and with donkeys loaded with mountains of brush wood. Gul Mast, the Afridi driver, leaned on the horn button until he pulled up at the customs house, near the Gate of Trumpets and Drums.

In the customs compound, camel trains and donkey caravans and trucks from Pakistan found place for unloading and inspection. The smooth and affable official in charge met Daggett with a smile which showed all his fine teeth. His black brows kept time with the twinkle of his dark eyes and welcoming gestures.

"Some things have arrived," Nadir Khan announced; his accent was British as the tweeds he wore.

However, Nadir proved no easier to deal with than had he worn the baggy pantaloons, massive turban, and embroidered vest of the old-time Kabuli official; and of this Daggett had an evil foreshadowing when they stepped into a room swarming with inspectors who picked small shipments to pieces. The sight of Magnus Reimer, squarish of body and face, was enough to prepare Daggett for a bad day.

It was not so much the length of Reimer's nose which was offensive. It was rather the prolongation of the tip, which made Daggett think of the tapir in the zoo back home. That nose, dipping and sniffing into everything; whereas he had always considered tapirs inoffensive and amiable animals, he now hated them for Reimer's sake. Then, that air of being quietly amused because he was clever enough to get breaks which other people didn't get—Reimer was the man who knew how, and he could not conceal the fact.

"Oh, hello, hello, Colonel. How do you do, Daggett?"

"Swell. How's tricks?"

"Hot enough for you?"

Daggett, certain he detected a nasty double meaning, nodded and turned to watch two clerks debate solemnly in Persian as they spread out a deck of cards. They were not playing two handed solitaire. They were

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making fifty-three separate and distinct entries, estimating the import duty on each individual card. Pictures, it seemed, came in a special category.

"Lucky I didn't order any pinochle decks," Daggett grumbled. "What've I got that's keeping things tied up?"

"Thumbtacks in a drafting set," Nadir explained, sympathetically. "They caused confusion. Some of my clerks are—ah—have, single track minds, as it were. Tacks are associated with carpets in some minds. Others classify them as cobbler's supplies. Others, as builder's supplies. But come, let me show you—"

He handed Daggett a document done in English and Pukhtu, which last the king had declared to be the official language instead of Persian. So every decent Kabuli continued talking Persian, like a gentleman, and began garbling things in Pukhtu. The English of the document was all right, but no telling what the native text said; and Daggett had forgotten to bring his interpreter along.

"Colonel, will you please glance at this, give me the idea—see if they match up, I mean?"

"Pleasure," Peale answered, and took the document.

Daggett said to Nadir, "But the things you did have listed on that paper, where are they?"

"They," replied the official, "are not here. We are billing you for duty in advance."

COLONEL PEALE broke in. "Quite plain, Steve. Says, stolen somewhere between Jalalabad and Nimla. Beg pardon, unaccountably missing."

"That is correct, sir," Nadir admitted. "The notation on the manifest was not transcribed. I am sorry."

"Wait a minute," Daggett objected. "Stolen or lost, I'm short on the deal already. How come, duty in advance?"

"You will doubtless recover the goods in due course."

Daggett restrained his impulse to burst into idiotic laughter at the very idea of ever recovering missing goods, and said, "Oh, sure, sure we may. Then I'll pay up."

Sighing, Nadir patiently explained, "A long time may elapse. It is barely possible there never is recovery. Therefore I must insist on payment of duty. Manifestly, we can not collect from the thieves—and the Government must not lose. His Majesty does not permit it."

Since the duty on canned goods, zoot suits, and reclaimed garments ranged from 100% to 200% *ad valorem*, such a payment would gut the till. Daggett's face revealed such dismay that Nadir Khan said, "It is not necessary to pay at once."

"Well, thanks. That helps a lot."

"Pardon me. I was about to add, the goods you have in customs will be impounded as collateral. With reasonable storage charges, and reasonable interest. We are always reasonable."

Daggett made a jaunty little salaam, and said with mockery to match the gesture, "The government can not lose! Good afternoon, sir!"

Magnus Reimer accosted him at the door. "If you need some stock to take care of your customers, I might make a deal with you."

"You already have, you long nosed son! You rigged this for me. I'll have your hide if it takes till Judgment Day!"

Reimer chuckled good humoredly, and left Daggett to figure ways of making good on his boast; the chances were too slender to be alarming.

COLONEL PEALE'S quarters were cluttered with boar spears, elephant guns, riding gear, and trophies. The place reeked of ginger, fenugreek, coriander, saffron, cardamon: he had devoted years to perfecting a curry powder better than any of the forty odd recipes he had tried during his years of service in Hindustan. Daggett, however, observed that the conspicuous bouquets and the sporting gear were merely facets of the man's gigantic curiosity and restlessness. The tables were heaped with tiles of Persian blue, with scraps of rugs dredged from ruins; with carved jade, and with manuscripts in different Eastern tongues.

Peale reached into a heap and drew from it a bound volume whose vellum pages were inscribed in black, and illuminated in red and gold.

"Ibn Battuta. Persian copy made a few years after the old boy dictated the story of twenty-five years of travel from Morocco to China. Describes the city of Qizil Khoja, up

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in Badakhshan Province. Naturally, earthquakes for the past six centuries have tumbled mountains into valley mouths, and forced changes in caravan routes."

"Sounds like a wild goose chase to me, Colonel. Where's the regimental brandy?"

"Er . . . brandy—to be sure, brandy!" Peale rummaged behind a Graeco-Buddhist urn for a bottle, and parted the Boukharan embroidery which curtained the shelves of a cabinet. Search furnished tumblers and a bottle of mineral water. "Forgot to mention," he went on, as he splashed the drinks, "Government made an aerial survey. Ruins, *stupas,* and the like show up in the photos. None of the officials took any stock in the details, except as pertaining to mapping or whatever the reason for the survey was. Naturally didn't. Because none of them know of this manuscript. Country's filthy with ruins, all look alike."

"Well, hell—here's looking at you!—what's this clutter of masonry in a valley blocked from both ends got that all the other ruins don't have?"

"Damn it, man!" Peale choked on his brandy. "Lost city visited by Ibn Battuta. Critics for centuries have debated on whether he was a blasted liar, or a gullible oaf. I'll write a monograph on my findings. For the Royal Asiatic Society, you know. I'll pay you handsomely for helping me get into Badakhshan. The governor is a frightful ass, I understand."

"Colonel—" Daggett poured himself another drink. "A man would have to be a frightful ass to go to Badakhshan when he could stay here, read Persian, and guzzle brandy. Meanwhile, what is left of my business would go to hell in a handbasket."

"It has already gone, hasn't it?" Peale countered dryly.

"That's gospel, but there is still a chance of catching Reimer with his pants down. A bare chance."

"Pants down—bare—ha! I like your way of putting it. See here, though, it would baffle him, your heading for the mountains. We'll return, *sub rosa,* and catch him off guard. As I said, I'll pay you handsomely, and then you'll be able to bribe the proper officials—er, the *kotwal* is honest. He's doing his best to stamp out corruption among these blasted bureaucrats, but even so, a present might induce him to investigate Reimer and Nadir Khan, instead of whoever he happens to be investigating at present.

"Fight the devil with fire, as it were. With his pants down, you know. Take a spot of brandy—"

He did; but he left without accepting Peale's offer. Not even a share of the buried treasure which the ruins might contain was sufficiently alluring to snare Daggett, who on his own account had been wondering how the *kotwal,* the chief magistrate of Kabul, could be set on Nadir's trail. Finally, there was something distinctly odd about Peale's notion that Qizil Khoja would contain buried treasure. While such was not impossible, the chances were that everything of value which could be moved had been taken away, centuries previous.

II

WHEN he got back to what Peale termed the "factory," Daggett found more activity than any place in Kabul normally showed at night. Uniformed police were posted at the entrance, repulsing natives who flocked to the gate, trying to get in. The traders from the mountains had left; the less they had to do with things official, the better they liked it. Magnus Reimer would deal with them, moreover.

The courtyard, Daggett saw, as Gul Mast tooled the truck into the inclosure, now swarmed with men from the customs house. The warehouse doors were open. Nadir Khan came up, and said, "Pardon the liberty we have taken in inspecting your place. The missing goods have been found."

With a chill of apprehension, Daggett echoed, "Missing goods—found—where?"

"Here, in storage," the bureaucrat answered. "They were smuggled in, let us say, from the disappearing point between Nimla and Jalalabad—clever, please tell me how you arrange it."

"Show me! The goods, I mean."

Nadir obliged. And when Daggett saw the crates and boxes and bales in a corner where none had been when he and Peale had left, he knew that he was on the hook. Nadir clinched this by flourishing documents and pointing to the merchandise, and saying, "Consignee and consignor markings correspond with invoices and manifests."

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There was nothing left for Daggett to say except, "How can we settle this matter?"

"A fine will be assessed against you. You are of course personally liable for whatever amount the government cannot realize from the sale of your goods."

"The government cannot lose. How much is the fine? When is it due?"

"That will be for my superior to decide. Meanwhile, I must put seals on the door of your warehouse. Nothing may be removed until he has made his decision." He added, with utmost amiability, "It is very unlikely that criminal charges will be filed. We are not unreasonable."

After this, he herded both police and bureaucrats from the court.

Daggett went to his quarters, which, like the rest of the factory, were mud-walled, with rammed earth floors. The furniture was largely made of packing-case lumber. It looked the way he felt. He touched a match to the gasoline lamp, planted himself in a chair, and got a cheroot going. Nadir's assurance that "We are not unreasonable" suggested that sufficient "presents" could square matters.

Colonel Peale's expedition began to look more worthwhile. Even though there were no treasure to divide, the salary would help, and then, because of the risks of the road, it would be no more than reasonable that the colonel buy the truck. But before jumping at such a conclusion, Daggett paused to study one interesting phase of the tangle.

The entire missing portion of the shipment had not been stacked up in his warehouse. Since some of the supposedly stolen goods had been smuggled so neatly into his own place, the remainder could as deftly have been slipped into Reimer's warehouse. "Make sure," he told himself, "and if the hunch is good, tell the *kotwal,* and that'll help him to make a good showing. If he really is out for bureaucratic hides, he'll like the chance. If he's a bribe taker himself, he can make a big to-do about tripping a penny-ante crook, and be just that much safer protecting someone who operates large scale."

Gul Mast, Daggett's driver and handyman, was reliable enough; but Daggett discarded the reasonable notion of taking him along as a witness. The minute you began to deal in witnesses, you asked for trouble: the other fellow could buy up professional perjurers to swamp you with contradictory testimony. For a very reasonable sum, Colonel Peale had declared, you could get a dozen men to swear on the Koran, each claiming that he, and he alone, had assassinated King Habibullah, some thirty years previous. Let the *kotwal* get the evidence; bucking the prosecution would be a different story entirely!

Gul Mast was snoring. So was the porter at the gate. Daggett, wearing an Astrakhan hat, had all the native silhouette he required; so he set out for Reimer's warehouse.

Water rushed down a channel in the center of the narrow street he followed. Dogs growled and snarled as they wrangled over refuse. From somewhere came the rakish thin voice of a flute—*yan-a-din, din-din-dan* it sounded off, over and over. He tried to picture the swirling skirt of a Kashmiri dancing girl, and might have, but for the hacking cough of a hasheesh smoker, and the stench of alleys which doubled as sewers.

When he came to the mouth of the alley leading to a ruined bazaar, he unlimbered the tire iron he had thrust into his belt, and fumbled for flashlight and screwdriver. These secure, he managed to climb over the crumbling wall, and without starting a slide. He picked his way among fallen beams. Finally he came to the Atlas Trading Company's compound. The earthquakes which shook Kabul had cracked the thick wall, and sufficiently to offer a foothold. First, however, he wanted to look at the front.

He nosed his way out of the debris until he had a view of the entrance. Between small, stumpy towers was a recessed gateway in which were niches that faced each other. These contained benchlike platforms where visitors lounged while awaiting admittance. By night, the porter should be there, on guard.

Daggett smelled no tobacco, nor saw any charcoal glow; the man was neither smoking nor cooking tea. Finally, strolling past, he concluded that the man had quit his post; otherwise, there would have been snoring or stirring. From afar, he heard the voice of the patrolman who covered the quarter. He made plenty of noise, to be sure and warn

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prowlers. He, no more than they, had any taste for needless encounters.

Daggett backtracked. Again in the ruins of the bazaar, he found foot and finger holds in the face of the compound wall. Since it had a marked batter, it was easy to climb to the top.

He crawled along the crest until he came to a ramp leading into the paved compound from whose center rose the warehouse. The ramp was a survivor of the days when every property owner depended on private guards to man the walls and repel raiders. From then on, it was simple, though he did have trouble with the noisy hinges of the warehouse door. Presently, however, he was inside, and among heaps of bales and boxes.

Getting busy with his flashlight, he skipped half a dozen deep-well pumps and a score of wheelbarrows. It was not until he came to canned goods and second-hand clothing that he had to slow down to study the markings, consignor and consignee: "Apperson & Gilley . . . J. Hutchinson, Ltd. . . ." Then he hit the jackpot: bales of surplus army blankets; a case, broken open, of canned salmon; five bales of men's suits. All these, and still others, were consigned to Daggett.

Just how much more he would have found was a question whose answer was indefinitely postponed when, near the door, someone sneezed. Daggett snapped off the flashlight. Whoever was at the entrance must have seen and heard him. A bad case of shakes gripped Daggett as, crouched in the gloom, he tried to collect his wits. And they needed it, for there was something definitely curious about the whole business.

Shock for a moment made Daggett like a hasheesh smoker to whom a second seems to take an hour to elapse. His senses and nerves had become so abnormally alive that time had to drag and drag. Time, after all, was only the effect of things perceived. If you perceived nothing, time didn't exist for you.

The man at the door had sneezed. He had been fighting that sneeze so long that when it overpowered him, it was an explosion. Then, despite the noise he'd made, the man struggled until he succeeded in choking the spasm in mid-breath. Plainly, he had been lurking, and his tension had made him an easy victim of the dust of wool and hides and dried rhubarb which weighted the air. He must have been watching a flashlight blob wander over mountains of trade goods—and had still waited. But why?

Fellow prowler, lying low for his own turn? If a guard, why had he not attacked, or else retreated to let Daggett do as he pleased? Daggett grappled with these and several thousands of other speculations. Also, he reached for a can of salmon.

No sound from the door; but he noted the silhouette of as much of the man as was clear of the jamb. There was a dim glint of metal.

DAGGETT began to get the queer feeling that the sneeze had been stifled so quickly that the invader might have reason to feel that he had not betrayed himself. Tension did play odd tricks. He swayed until his shoulder touched a tower of boxes. With firm footing, he gave a sudden heave. He shouted, "*Khabardar!*"

Look out! The warning burst forth with all Daggett's lung power. The tower of boxes crashed to the floor. Daggett stretched himself in a sidewise bound. From the doorway came a rifle blast and a yell.

From his new position, Daggett heaved the can of salmon. It thumped against a stack of crates. The man blazed away at the sound. Daggett nailed him from the flank, bowling him over; he dropped his gun, and before he could recover from the heavy landing, Daggett had doubled him up with a boot to the stomach.

The ramp leading to the crest of the wall made for a quick getaway. While the two shots must have aroused the quarter, everyone who was indoors stayed there; and the patrol was apparently waiting for reinforcements before investigating. Daggett thus got a good start, and he was wise enough not to waste it. It was not until he got back to his own compound that he pulled himself together sufficiently to realize that he had accomplished little beyond warning Reimer.

Bit by bit, an uncomfortable conclusion forced itself upon him: that Reimer, giving him credit for imagination and the ability to add two and two, had posted an armed guard to spy on prowlers, rather than arrest them; or, to wait, observe, and then fire, or at least, compel immediate surrender. Any such surmise of course implied that Reimer

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had set men to watch Daggett, which was plausible enough, since spying was one of Kabul's major industries.

Reimer, who managed the Kabul branch of an outfit which had offices all over the Orient, had every reason for getting into the swing of things in that spy-ridden city. By putting a competitor out of business, and so increasing his own showing, he would have a short-cut to promotion. This was the background; but what kept Daggett awake most of the night was devising some way of protecting himself against what could well be Reimer's next move—bringing charges of breaking and entering.

By morning, Daggett had made up his mind to beat Reimer to the punch. Though fully aware of the risk, he went to the chief magistrate's headquarters, and bribed his way to the head of the line of those who waited to present petitions or render reports. And in far less time than he had anticipated, Daggett was facing the *kotwal,* who sat cross-legged on a rug spread on the narrow platform at the head of the whitewashed room.

Several soldiers were posted at the door. Two secretaries squatted at the magistrate's feet. He wore a ponderous and precisely wrapped turban. His beard was long; his face and forehead were long, and his mouth severe. No new-fangled fripperies for him; his secretaries used the old-fashioned reeds and saucers containing ink-saturated silk waste. There was not a chair in sight, nor any other evidence of the modern touch which was invading Kabul. Daggett's heart sank; he, an infidel, had come to put himself far out on a limb, and then hand the saw to a hardshell Moslem doctor of laws.

The *kotwal* surprised him by saying, in labored but understandable English, "Good morning, Mr. Daggett. Please sit down." The severe mouth relaxed, and the biting eyes twinkled with a touch of good-humored malice. "I shall not detain you until your legs develop cramps. What do you wish to tell me?"

Guided by the magistrate's gesture, Daggett moved to seat himself on the dais, then checked himself and picked a spot on the floor. The old man smiled in plain appreciation of the courtesy which forbade a visitor's being too ready to accept an "honorable" seat, and urged Daggett to join him on the dais. Once he had his legs painfully warped into shape, with feet decorously placed, Daggett told his story.

He concluded, "If I am to be fined for having goods in my place, on which no duty has been paid, Magnus Reimer should be fined much more for having my goods, duty unpaid, in his place."

The *kotwal* fingered his beard. "That is good logic. But after last night's disturbance, the evidence has undoubtedly been moved. There is nothing I can do. Not after your warning him as you did."

"I had to make sure! If I had come to see you without first looking, I'd have run the risk of—of—"

"Of my thinking you a liar, and acting accordingly?" That thin, dry smile showed itself for a moment. "Would that have been worse than the risk you did run?"

"From what I have heard," Daggett answered boldly, "it would."

The *kotwal* spoke to a secretary; the man handed him a slip of paper. After a glance at it, the *kotwal* said, "Would you be surprised if I told you I have here a report of your doings?"

Daggett eyed him, and read nothing in the bleak face. "No."

"Do you know what I am going to do?"

Under the prevailing Moslem law, this man was prosecutor, judge, and jury; he based his decisions on the Koran and the Traditions, and the executioner carried them out. The only appeal was to the king.

Daggett answered, "Who but God knows what any man will do?"

"Whether or not you were aware of it, your answer is precisely in accord with the Holy and Excellent Koran. What I shall do is give you advice. To wit, these words, spoken in ancient times: *Leave him who has offended you in the hands of Time, for Time and Fortune will avenge you.* You have my permission to leave, Mr. Daggett."

Daggett left, and without knowing whether he had been blessed, brushed off, or filed for future reference. Meanwhile, he was at large, and for however long that state continued, he'd better make the most of it. Colonel Peale's offer began to look good, if only because his going into Badakhshan would convince Reimer that he had accepted defeat, and that pressing a charge

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of breaking and entering would not be worth the effort. So, once he had the magistrate's headquarters behind him, Daggett lost no time getting to the factory to have Gul Mast load their personal gear into the truck, and drive to Peale's place.

III

WHEN Daggett's truck, steaming like a geyser, at last rolled into the courtyard of Yar Ali Khan's fortress in mountainous Badakhshan, the *hakim's* round-faced secretary welcomed him and Peale. Yar Ali's place was the end of the trail as far as wheeled traffic was concerned; from here, Daggett and the colonel would go on with a pack train. While Peale had brought an archeological excavation permit from Kabul, this document, which he gave the *hakim's* secretary, did not compel Yar Ali to furnish horses or assistance of any sort. He was the law and the government in that corner of remote Badakhshan.

Jang Bahadur, Peale's orderly, a grizzled and stocky Gurkha as "regimental" as his master, brought the guns and blanket rolls into the whitewashed guest room which opened to the main court. Gul Mast meanwhile went swaggering into the settlement to inquire about saddle mounts and pack horses. Equally important was the matter of keeping his ears open for rumors concerning the trail ahead. Gul Mast, clean-shaven, good-looking, and with an engaging grin, would have no trouble at all getting acquainted with the settlement sprawled on the rocky shelf overlooking the river.

That evening, the *hakim,* Yar Ali Khan, received them in his audience hall. He wore a compactly wound white turban, a knee-length military tunic, and riding breeches. His boots were from London. His spurs, of like origin, were upside down, in which respect they resembled his English.

"Taking pleasure welcoming the notorious Colonel Peale," he said. "Welcoming with my good friend, E-stephen Daggett Esquire."

He was hawk-faced, tanned, and deeply lined. His beard, clipped to a sharp point, jutted out and prolonged the line of his jaw. He touched turban and then his row of medals as he bowed and with an opulent gesture bade his guests be seated at a table decked out with silver, china, and red damask.

A steward followed by helpers carried in an enormous platter on which a boiled sheep lay, surrounded by saffron-tinted rice dotted with raisins and pistachios. The *hakim's* secretary and retainers seated themselves on the rammed earth floor.

With a flourish, Yar Ali whipped out his silver-hafted dagger, speared one of the glassily staring sheep's eyes, and presented the delicacy for the colonel to gulp down. Daggett was favored with the other eye. That ordeal done, the guests found the banquet palatable enough, and according to local custom, wolfed it in silence. It was not until the table was cleared that Yar Ali made conversation.

"This digging for history—very fine—uncovering glorious past—tell more, sir—buried gold, what?"

This was dangerous thinking, so Daggett answered, "No buried treasure, your excellency. Not after Tamerlane marched through," and with that, he steered the subject to guns.

"Er . . . speaking of shooting," Peale finally remarked, "I fancied there was a bit of musketry on the way. I'm sure I heard a stray bullet, several in fact."

"Back to Pul-i-Shir?" The khan flourished his knife, as though to dispose of trivialities. "Afzal Khan and Azim Khan, they have a dead cousin in Pakistan, now they fight about estate dividing, everybody is mad. The men hate themselves, the women hate themselves. Soon they hating me when I hold court to say, this is for you, this is for him." His face became somber; he muttered, and then, of a sudden, brightened. "Tomorrow, we will see about horses."

BACK in the guest room, Daggett said to Peale, "That feud may make it tough getting pack horse drivers. With just about everyone related to everyone else, neutrals will be scarce."

"Er—I rather sensed he'd come to a solution."

Daggett grimaced. "Sure. He could send us back to Kabul, so we can't be sniped by mistake. Save him a lot of headaches."

"He simply can't do that," Peale declared, stubbornly confident.

Daggett shrugged, and slid into his sleep-

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ing bag. He wished that he had the colonel's fine trick of dismissing obstacles by declaring that they did not exist. Instead, he got himself keyed up from trying to figure means of dealing with Yar Ali in the event that he did want to hustle them back to Kabul.

The wind, whining down from high peaks of the Hindu Kush, played strange tricks with the square tower rising from one corner of the *robat*. Being empty except for the ladder which reached to the observation platform, the tower was like an enormous organ pipe which mumbled and muttered. This and other sounds kept Daggett so uneasy that he finally slipped on his felt boots and stepped to the veranda to check up on the truck and its cargo.

He'd been wondering about that lot of dynamite; it didn't fit into archeological practice. Peale had glibly explained that it would come in handy in case they found the approach to the lost valley difficult. Daggett was also thinking of the Gypsies encamped at the fringe of the settlement. They had eyed the truck, as though marking it for pilfering.

He played the flashlight under the tarpaulin. He went to the tunnel-like entrance of the *robat*. The sentries were asleep in the wall niches which sheltered them from the wind. Nothing wrong; yet in Daggett uneasiness kept increasing. He felt he was being watched.

His hunch proved itself when he turned to retrace his steps. The only warning was a whiff of jasmine, and the muted clink of bracelets. Before he could move, the woman was beside him, a hand on his arm. Whoever she was, this was dangerous. It was risky business, Gul Mast had made clear in his accounts of his incessant woman chasing expeditions in Kabul, for a native to be caught in a huddle with any woman not of his immediate family; for a foreigner, it was fatal.

What gave the shock its final impact was when she said in English, "I'm going back to Kabul in your truck, put your things so I can crawl in and hide."

If she had told him to take poison, her words would have seemed far more sensible. "Whoever you are, you're crazy!"

She was now so near that despite her heavy cape, he could feel how well formed she was. "I have to talk to you," she persisted, "No one will hear us, come with me."

He had to humor her. A woman sufficiently desperate to accost an infidel was capable of screaming if he tried to repulse her. She made for the entrance at the base of the watch tower. Once inside, she said, "I was waiting and waiting, but your friend was in the way."

"What do you want, who are you?"

"Zayda," she said, "I went to the English school in Peshawar, father was very moddern, so am I."

"If we were caught now, we'd get our throats cut."

"I'd rather have that than stay in the mountains any longer. You're an American."

"That doesn't make me knife proof."

"You talk like the American lady at the school."

"Look here, Zayda, I'm not going back to Kabul for weeks, we're going up the river, and into the mountains."

"Oh, that's grand! I'll dress like a mountaineer farmer's woman, none of your men will know the difference, they'll think I'm a native. I'll do anything to get out of the mountains, I don't belong here, my father's dead, and I'm going to marry an American and live in the States."

At all events, Zayda was practical, according to her lights. He said, grimly, "You went to school, learned to wear nylons and nail polish, and you saw too many movies. I guess you've picked your American already?"

"I was watching you from the women's quarters when you came in, and then the secretary's wife told me who you were—so—"

"So I'm your ticket to the States?"

ZAYDA plucked the flashlight from his hand and turned the beam on herself. She had magnificent eyes, and her nose, neither straight nor aquiline, gave distinction to her loveliness. Her red velvet hood was embroidered with gilt thread; it twinkled with golden coins. A Kashmiri shawl concealed all but glimpses of her black hair, and smooth throat. Smiling at him through her own spotlight, Zayda made the most of fine teeth and generous mouth.

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He got all this before he could snatch the flash and snap it off.

Then he got an extra dividend. When Zayda was finally done kissing him, he was breathless, and also, convinced that the Afghans were pretty nearly right in keeping their women veiled and locked up.

"See here, darling, I'm already married," he gasped.

"Oh, I know your women won't let you have more than one wife, but that's all right," Zayda pointed out, blandly. "I'll find someone else in Hollywood, I won't make any trouble for you."

Anything at all to break it up! He proposed, "Let's talk about it when I come back. You cannot go into the mountains with me."

Daggett made a dive for the archway. Zayda grabbed but missed. He darted into the guest room and in the darkness, fumbled for the bolt, to make sure Zayda would not break in later. But no doors could guard him against the girl's dangerous connivings.

In the morning, Peale remarked, "You look peaked—better lace your tea with a spot of rum—your muttering and mumbling kept me awake."

"The banquet, something I ate. Sheep's eye."

Presently, the *hakim's* secretary came in to announce, "Sir, allied to greatness, his excellency requests your presence in court. Escort awaiting, be pleased to accompany."

Eight Uzbeks with rifles stood at the door. And when Daggett saw a veiled woman being marched across the court to the audience hall, his breakfast disagreed with him.

"Er—take a tot of grog," Peale said, solicitously. "Court ceremonials are loathesome, you know."

The colonel was putting his own interpretation on "court," and assumed that the eight Uzbeks were to lend a touch of Asiatic pomp.

Two hatchet-faced and hard-eyed mountaineers wearing grimy sheepskin jackets, grimy turbans, and grimier pantaloons were heading for the audience room. Each had musket-armed followers. Then came the local *mullah,* the stern old man who represented Allah and the law.

YAR ALI, after greeting his guests, seated himself and gestured toward the two chairs at his left. The *mullah* placed himself at the right. The veiled woman and the mountaineers waited midway between door and dais. The secretary began reading in Persian; during a pause, the *hakim* said to Daggett, "Those fellows, Azim and Afzal, they hate themselves, you remember? That person with the veil, it is part of the dead man's estate they fight for."

Turn and turn about, Azim and Afzal stormed, gestured, thumped rifle butt against floor to clinch a claim. They scowled at each other. Their eyes promised more accurate musketry as soon as they got away from the *hakim's* restraining presence.

From time to time the *mullah,* a block-faced man with an uncompromising mouth, cut in with a citation from Fakhru'l Sabikani's Law of Inheritance, written in the year 1312, in Damascus, and in Arabic, which no one in the mountains understood, except *mullahs* and scholars.

Azim and Afzal finally made a grab for the woman. Her veil slipped, and Daggett's intuition was confirmed: Zayda was part of the estate being settled. He got his first clear sight of her, and saw that his glimpse by flashlight had failed to do her justice. With a well-feigned show of confusion and haste, she fumbled skillfully before getting her face covered again.

Her eyes asked, "*Now* how do you like me?"

The *mullah,* missing all this, said to the contestants, "You, Afzal—you, Azim—you

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are heirs, share and share. You have divided the cash and the merchandise. You have divided everything but this person, and since she is one, not two, there is an end to dividing. Let one take her to marry his son, and let that man give the other a payment of a hundred sheep—God loves the generous."

Afzal shouted, "O Khan! She is closer of kin to me than to him! I will not take sheep or cash, he mocks me!"

Azim thumped with his rifle butt. "Thou son of a lewd mother and a donkey, she is closer of kin to me, and will thy ape's-child of a son have her? O Khan, he mocks me, and if at the first sight of him out of your presence, I do not make a better shooting than I have made, I'll cut his throat, or may Allah do as much to me, and more!"

"Silence!" Yar Ali commanded. "Silence!" He turned on the *mullah*. "Father of Learning—"

Azim shouted him down. "This I swear by the Three Divorces!"

That made it serious, and roughened the way of the peacemaker. Yar Ali frowned, fingered his beard, and resumed, "Father of Learning, this man has taken an oath. What can you say to prevent a feud?"

"It is an evil oath. Let him be absolved from fulfilling it."

Yar Ali brightened as though the *mullah* had played into his hands. "Absolving him does not restore the honor he will lose if he fails to kill his enemy. Give judgment so there will be no feud. If these men spend all their time redeeming their honor, their flocks and fields and families will suffer. I say again, O *Mullah,* give judgment to end this quarrel."

"O *Hakim,* only Allah can sift the evil and the folly out of men when they are foolish. Give thou the judgment, Yar Ali."

"O Men! You have heard him?" Yar Ali demanded.

"Yea, we have heard."

AND Daggett, though relieved immensely that he had not been accused on Zayda's account, nonetheless had a growing premonition of evil; and it came to a point when Yar Ali said to him, "My friend, this daughter of Satan has brought infidel ways with her, to make trouble. You marry her, and the peace upon us all."

Daggett answered, and from the heart, "Trouble! That's just what she'll be making me."

Peale gave him a savage nudge and cut in, "Ah . . . pay no attention, your excellency, he's . . . ah . . . shy . . . overcome."

"She is young, she speaks English, is beautiful," Yar Ali said.

"She's got no monopoly there! No dice! Nothing doing."

Zayda's uncles, after a whispered conference with her, muttered and glared fiercely at Daggett. Yar Ali said, "They say you insult their niece, saying not good enough for you."

"Ah—uh—I didn't mean it that way," Daggett groped.

"You've offended them all," Peale said, severely.

"All right, you marry her!" Daggett proposed.

Peale gulped. "I say, you're very thick-witted, my dear fellow. You have no social standing in Kabul, you needn't worry, and she'll be most valuable—ah—keeping you informed as to native gossip—marvelous opportunity—"

"Well, to hell with it! I have enough grief already!"

Yar Ali said, smoothly, "There may be difficulty, too much troubles, getting horses, getting men for history digging. Azim and Afzal, they are insulted. The honor is hurt. I have no soldiers to guard you when you go to Kabul without making the digging."

"This is your party, Colonel."

"I am paying you a handsome salary."

Zayda cried, "I wouldn't marry that old goat, no matter how many Cadillacs, mink coats—anyway, he's not an American."

"God blast it all, man!" Peale whispered tensely. "There is more to this than archeology—I promise you, there is. You can't let me down—we're in a nasty situation—"

Yar Ali whispered to Daggett, "If her uncles knew that you and she had met last night, they are offended, the honor, what?"

The voice was like a knife caressing a whetstone: Daggett knew he had been whipsawed, and said, grimly, "You win, all of you! It's a deal, but keep her here at the *robat,* till I come back from the mountains, the lost valley—rough going, no place for a woman."

Yar Ali spoke to the *mullah.* The doctor of laws beckoned to witnesses. The *hakim's*

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secretary penned a marriage contract. And a few words of Arabic completed the ceremony.

"You stay with the *hakim's* women," Daggett said to his bride, and wiped a pint of perspiration from his forehead. "Have a good time, counting your Cadillacs and minks and stuff till I come back."

IV

THE forgotten valley, its ancient entrance blocked by debris shaken down from high peaks by an earthquake, was where Peale had marked it on his map; and in it was what remained of Qizil Khoja.

Aside from two *stupas*, both of them scattering their masonry about the raised ground on which they stood, there was little to indicate that this was the site of the city which had filled much of the two-mile width of the valley, and had stretched a like distance along both sides of what was now a dry water course. The upheaval had so lifted and broken the ground that a new channel had been formed, on the further flank of the peaks; this, after several miles, merged with the unchanged portion of the stream which ran past Yar Ali's *robat*. But for the stretch of dry bed, forking from the present river, and leading up to the barrier, neither Peale nor Daggett would have suspected the existence of the forgotten valley.

Not far from the ruined *stupas* was a group of grottos hewn into the valley wall. These, as well as niches from which sculptured gods stared across the valley, were the work of Buddhist monks. Here Daggett made camp; but when Peale pointed and said, "Quarters all ready for us, simply clear out a bit of rubbish and we'll be quite snug," he declined with thanks.

"You and the pack horse drivers are welcome to private apartments. I'm staying in the open, just in case there is a quake."

There was grass aplenty, and several springs whose copious overflow worked its way through the base of the debris which blocked the entrance. The network of pools and creeks pleased Peale enormously.

The following day, Gul Mast, Jang Bahadur, and the horse tenders were set to work digging to the original floor level of the city. Peale, tense to the point of irritability, paced about, muttering, drawing at his pipe, lighting, relighting, and cursing it. He had Daggett list and photograph the bits of glazed pottery, carved wood, the tiles and the sculptured masonry they unearthed. Finally he said, "Er—carry on, carry on, I'll be back directly."

He headed up the dry river bed, crossed, and made for the opposite cliffs. When he returned, his face was twitching, and his eyes had a wild gleam. "We've had enough of this archeological nonsense," he declared. "Have all hands follow me—bring shovels —yes, and that basin and skillet."

Accustomed to the idiocy of *sahibs*, the men obeyed without comment, surprise, or interest. Once he had them in motion, Daggett ran ahead to overtake Peale. "You've had rubies on the brain," he said to the colonel. "As well as antiques. So now we've become a prospecting party?"

"Ibn Battuta mentioned the ruby mines of Qizil Khoja. Fabulously rich. Extract the gems from the limestone, instead of washing alluvium as they do in Burma."

For a moment, Daggett was caught up by Peale's enthusiasm and excitement; and then he became uneasy. "We have an *archeological* permit, and that's all. Not a mining concession."

"To be sure, to be sure! But bureaucrats become unreasonable the moment you mention minerals. As it is, we've accidentally come upon rubelliferous deposits, no harm exploring them. After all, we have dug up artifacts from the ruins of Qizil Khoja."

Peale set the entire crew to work digging prospect shafts in the dry river bed. He and Daggett panned the gravel. After a day's hard work, they accumulated a teaspoonful of small rubies, such as the traders had been bringing to Daggett's factory in Kabul; but the gems were sharp-edged. They had not been washed a long way from the crumbling limestone which had released them.

The following morning, half the drivers decided to leave, and did so. They were not interested in pay. Enough was enough, and only a fool of an infidel would stay away from home so long. Yar Ali, however, would send replacements; Daggett, who had anticipated such walkouts as standard practice, had made arrangements. And the next batch of diggers would bring sheep and rice and other supplies.

The men still on the job resumed their

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digging and panning. While they could be counted on to keep at least half the rubies they found, their winnings would be relatively trivial, and they would turn in enough to make a showing. Meanwhile, Daggett and Peale went up the valley until, in a narrow cleft in the wall they came to tunnels drifted deep into the limestone. These were high on the face of the wall, and were reached by paths the ancient miners had cut.

Daggett crawled into a tunnel. It opened into a natural pocket, egg-shaped, and perhaps six by eight feet, formed by the trickling of water, a seepage which over the centuries had dissolved the stone. Overhead, he caught a glimmer of light, which suggested that the miners, after having located the "bubble" from above, had decided that entering it from the face of the cliff would be the easiest.

By flashlight, he and Peale studied the walls, which were sooted from torches. Tool marks showed where veins of softened limestone had been worked. "Cleaned up, and moved on," Peale said through tight lips. "But we've found the lode, the mines Ibn Battuta saw and described in his lost pages."

Later, they came to shafts reaching into water-formed pockets. Elsewhere, veins had been exposed by building fires to heat the stone, after which it had been doused with cold water to fracture it. And eventually, high on the slope, they came to a pocket which had not been worked. Whether because of earthquake, plague, or invasion, the miners breached the "bubble" and had then quit.

A few blows of a pick completed the job. Looking in, Daggett saw a floor overlaid with the hard chunks deposited when the matrix had been dissolved. The entire crew was summoned and put to work making ladders, and carrying the concentrate down in baskets to the creek, for washing and sorting. And then, as he picked the lot over, piece by piece, Daggett drew on his geological survey work to get the words of doom:

"Garnet . . . graphite . . . wollastonite pyrrhotite . . . felspar . . . here's some margarite, it used to be a ruby until it combined with silica."

Peale groaned. "That size—and used to be a ruby? But you're quite mad! Rubies, sapphires, corundum in general, it's permanent!"

Daggett sighed. "Usually, yes. But the right kind of water, working with minerals associated with rubies, can make that change." He resumed the sorting, and came to several small gems such as had been washed from the gravel; and there were two spinels.

Peale straightened up. "Ibn Battuta speaks of enormous rubies. This damnable chunk of margarite sustains his story. We'll drive tunnels, we'll sink shafts, as long as the dynamite lasts! With your geological experience, you can pick the spots where pockets are most likely to exist, and near the surface."

"You're making it awfully simple, Colonel, but let's try it."

PEALE'S persistence and Daggett's scientific guesswork deserved a better reward than they got. They cracked several pockets, but with a take which made Daggett grumble, "Just enough to make talk, and get us on the hook for holding out valuable finds —or did I tell you that all minerals belong to the government."

"I was quite aware of that," Peale answered. "Which is why we have to make a strike—to keep from being unjustly accused of . . . er . . . seqeustering valuable gems. Though we'd not be so silly as to turn in everything we found. Just enough to have a chance of getting a concession to work for the government, on royalty basis."

Late that afternoon, a fresh relay of men came from Yar Ali's, bringing supplies; and an hour later, Zayda rode into camp. Both clothes and the donkey looked as though she had made a deal with some farmer's wife. The first warning Daggett had was when Peale came to his tent, pulled the flap aside, and pointed to the veiled woman.

"Er—Mrs. Daggett has just arrived," he announced, as he gave Zayda a nudge, and then bolted.

Daggett nearly kicked over his camp chair and the field desk on which he had spread the archeological "treasures" he was cataloguing to make a good show in Kabul, so that rubies would be a mere incidental.

"What the blazes—how—how'd you get away?"

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"I found a way!" She lowered her veil. "Did you think I wouldn't? Then I followed the pack train, just keeping it in sight."

He eyed the girl, and he eyed the bundle of luggage, wrapped up in a length of *khilim,* which she had dumped on the floor. Although tired, bedraggled, and dressed for a day's work tilling a patch of barley, Zayda's loveliness surmounted all obstacles: and the scent of jasmine completed the job. It was only her outlandish garb, and his recollection of that grotesque marriage that built up a barrier of unreality. And that barrier was crumbling.

One half of Daggett was saying to him, *"The whole business is dizzy, she's a movie-struck idiot,"* while the other half retorted, *"She's a white woman, a lot of woman, and you married her."* He glanced about the tent, sizing up the clutter of rifles, sleeping bag, mess gear, saddle and bridle, and then back at Zayda. Her smile and her eyes puzzled him. He nudged her elbow as though she were something very fragile, and said, "Sit down—you're all done in—we'll be eating soon—bet you could do with some *shashlik*—there's a bucket of water—" He reached for a collapsible basin. "You have time to clean up—wait, I'll see if there's some hot water, heat some at the cook's fire."

"No, don't. You'll look like a fool, waiting on me!" That odd little smile came out of hiding. "You made enough of a fool out of me, first acting as if I were a—the—witch—witch of Endor, before all those people, and then telling Yar Ali to lock me up, you didn't want me!" The smile which had started out to be mocking vanished, and she choked back a sob, and her voice cracked. "How did I get here, and *why?*" Zayda cried. "All those hags of Yar Ali's, laughing at me because you would, didn't want me!"

He hadn't thought of that; and from embarrassment he shifted to penitence. Impulsively, he caught her in his arms. "Darling, I'm sorry—"

She twisted clear of him. She picked up her bundle of luggage, and faced him, defiantly, triumphantly. "See how you like it, being made to look foolish, when I walk out of your tent and move into one of those caves!"

He took one step after her, and then checked himself, and as he watched her heading for the row of grottos, he was not a bit happy about Zayda's solution of what had appeared to be a very awkward situation. He shrugged, and sourly said to himself, "Well—for short honeymoons, damn if that is not a record!"

And when he went out to eat—under the circumstances, he could not appear to be sulking in his tent—Gul Mast looked embarrassed, and Peale, trying to be tactful, jabbered incoherently about rubies, artifacts, and the silly Afghan mining laws.

IN THE morning, Gul Mast came to say, "Sir, the lady says she is going to cook your breakfast, she will cut my throat for try to stop her, it makes her look like a no-account woman if she don't cook the chow for you. What do I do?"

"Let her cut your throat, or let her do as she pleases! She won't poison me, I'm sure."

But Gul Mast looked as though he would not be too sure of that.

When Daggett came back from ruby hunting, the frightful disorder of his tent had been straightened out. Gul Mast looked sheepish. Peale seated himself on the field desk and said, "Ha! Nothing like a woman's touch about the home."

Daggett grumbled, "She's making a triple-A jackass of me—all this nice housekeeping, and then that fine show of parking her rug in her own private grotto! You're halfway responsible for all this damn nonsense! How much longer are we going to horse around here, cracking pockets of dime-store rubies, garnets, and other muck of that sort?"

"We still have a bit of dynamite. We'll use it."

And then the bride came in, tricked out with her bracelets and velvet cap and brocaded tunic. She wore a scrap of veil not quite as heavy as a wisp of smoke. It glamorized instead of concealed.

"I was too mad to tell you last night, or this morning," she began. "While I was waiting for the pack train to get far enough away for me to follow without being noticed, a long-nosed American and an official from Kabul, a good-looking, smiling man speaking English-style English rode up with ten-twelve soldiers to see Yar Ali."

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"What? What's that? Long-nosed American?"

When she had done describing the pair, Daggett knew that Magnus Reimer and Nadir Khan had come to the mountains to dip their beaks into whatever enterprise had brought him and the colonel into Badakhshan. He said to Peale, "Now we are on the hook! We've got to get out of here—we can't afford a run-in in this out of the way corner, even if we could buck the odds."

Peale cursed bitterly. "Nadir's official, which'll impress Yar Ali. Madame, there were *soldiers?*"

Zayda shrugged. "They wore khaki, and carried rifles and bayonets. I don't know whether they were government soldiers, or private guards, they all look alike."

Then British optimism took charge. "See here, Steve!" Peale said severely. "They'll lose time banquetting, and getting fresh horses, they have no cause for hurrying. We have ample time to look for a few more pockets, you're quite clever, smelling them out from the general structure and weathering of the limestone. And still get out of here, be close enough to Yar Ali's for there to be no nonsense."

He talked Daggett into line; and when, the following day, they had accomplished little more than use up all but the final couple of sticks of explosive, he said, "At all events, we tried our best. Since you insist, let us break camp."

In the midst of their preparations, an earthquake shook the valley. The floor rippled. Tall crags swayed. The first rumbling came from deep underground. Then, as the initial impact subsided to a twitching, a second shock was delivered. The horse tenders howled and called on Allah. Rocks clattered, smashing against high shelves, and dropping with the debris they knocked loose. It was as though an enormous blast had been released in slow motion: a prolonged, sullen rumbling which continued, unbroken, despite the intervals between minor jolts which kept the ruined stupas shedding block after block of masonry.

Great cracks appeared in what had been solid limestone wall. A long section of dry river bank tore off and toppled with a thump which Daggett could feel through his boots. Then came an impact which knocked him off balance. An entire buttress, several hundred feet high, had parted from the wall. It was as though a skyscraper had been shoved off its base, to drop as a tall tree drops.

DAGGETT picked himself up, grabbed Zayda and followed the horse tenders. Boulders dropping from the near cliff speeded his flight. Peale refused to run, but set a record in fast walking. Once out of range of fragments which still fell and bounced, and rolled, he mopped his forehead, licked his gray lips, and said, "Er—quite right, high time we decamp."

Zayda's color returned, though she still breathed in gasps. Abruptly, she remembered that Daggett had to be humiliated, so she broke away from the arm which still supported her. She looked about, shrugged, and said, "What are you afraid of? The mountaineers don't mind a bit, they've lived here for ages." And then, "Look—up there—"

She pointed. A "bubble" had been exposed by the shearing of the cliff. "Let's go up and look. Just suppose—"

Daggett looked at Peale. Peale looked at Daggett.

"If you're afraid, I'll go up myself," Zayda taunted.

Daggett, reasonably sure that the quake had subsided and that equilibrium was restored, clambered up the talus, and along a ledge. Muttering and puffing, Peale followed. They were neck and neck when they came to the newly exposed cavity.

The deposit was apparently like what they had been sorting. Then Daggett fished out a six-sided prism to which limestone still clung. It took him a long moment to convince himself that what he fingered was not an hallucination; that it actually was a ruby the size of a Malaga grape. He was still licking his lips when Peale said, casually, "Most unusual, your finding one, too."

"Uh—what?"

"Very neat. Saves awkwardness dividing spoils." He displayed his strike. "Each making a find."

Daggett gulped. "One of those things that simply can't happen. Barring serious flaws, they're worth twenty-thirty thousand bucks apiece, and turned into *rupees,* we deal in large numbers."

And then Zayda, who had come up, un-

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heard, contributed her bit. "Oh, now we'll be able to buy me a Cadillac and a black lace nightgown and a villa in Hollywood."

Daggett let out a long, quavering breath. "Let's get the hell out of here, while we're winning."

V

DAGGETT was saying to Jang, "Don't bother with those couple sticks of dynamite, leave 'em in your cave, and don't fool with picks and shovels, no use taking them back," when Peale, binoculars in hand, came out to announce, "Your wife was all too right—Nadir and Reimer are riding down on us now!"

Zayda handed Daggett his Springfield and a couple of clips of cartridges. He looked at the dozen odd armed men who closed in on the camp, shook his head, and told her, "This will take headwork, not guns. Go to your kitchenette and heat a big pot of water, in case we serve tea."

"Tea? Are you crazy?"

"If we shot it out with them, and drove them off, and any of them got back to Kabul, you know what'd happen to me. I'm a foreigner, I don't have the feuding privileges your uncles have. Ask Gul Mast if he or any of the horse tenders have any opium—it might come in handy, we might have a chance to keep Nadir and Reimer talking awhile before they get rough. Drop the big rubies into the kettle—in case we're searched, that's the last place they'd look."

When the cavalcade drew up in a crescent about the group, Daggett faced Reimer and the ever-smiling Nadir Khan. The colonel, sucking his pipe, looked as though nothing less than an engraved announcement would call his attention to the newcomers. Daggett said, "Get off your horses, gentlemen, the archeology's grand, we have shovels for all. Nice quakes we have out here, how'd you like it?"

Nadir and Reimer dismounted. The noncom leading the troops gave a command. The men slid down like meal bags. They unslung their carbines. Nadir, hand on pistol butt, began, "We came concerning permits."

"That's right," Reimer seconded.

Daggett said, "Gul Mast! Break out smokes! And tea. Colonel, let me present Mr. Nadir Khan, of the Afghan customs house. Mr. Magnus Reimer, my competitor from Kabul."

"Er—the faces are familiar. How do you do? Filthy country up this way, isn't it?"

Nadir Khan produced a document stamped with an official seal. "We learned at Yar Ali's you've been mining rubies. In fact, Colonel, we learned in Kabul that that was your intention." He smiled, wagged his head. "Some scraps of paper—translation of Ibn Battuta—they blew out of a window, and were called to my attention."

At this roundabout way of being told that spies had gone through his house after his departure, Peale answered, "Alluvial deposits covering this archeological site are fairly filthy with rubies of a sort—wretchedly small ones—we couldn't ignore them. We've not had a chance to report them, to collect the government bonus we're entitled to."

Daggett addressed Nadir: "What's the paper you've got?"

"Warrant for the arrest of the entire party, the principals, I mean, you and the colonel."

"For failing to report rubies, when we're still in the field?"

"Of course not. Breaking and entering Mr. Reimer's warehouse, assaulting an Afghan subject, kicking same in solar plexus. An affair pertaining to the customs, hence my presence."

"Wait a minute! Colonel Peale didn't kick anyone—"

"He," Nadir interrupted, "aided and abetted your evasion of arrest."

"Even Afghan law isn't that cockeyed! Colonel, will you read the warrant?"

"No bloody use, my boy. A platoon of riflemen give a more accurate translation than I possibly could. We are under arrest."

Nadir raised his hand. "Please do not leap to conclusions, sir. We four can discuss this." He spoke to the noncom, and as the cavalry prepared to make camp, he nudged Daggett's elbow with one hand, and Reimer's with the other. "Let us have the tea you so hospitably suggested."

"Gul Mast, *chai!*"

"Ayuwah, huzoor, chai!" the Afridi sounded off, and made for Zayda's grotto.

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"What's the deal?" Daggett demanded, when Gul Mast filled the cups.

Nadir answered, "This complaint could be withdrawn. The witness could fail to identify you as the man who booted him."

"For how much, Reimer?"

"Your finding rubies," Reimer answered, "puts an entirely different light on things. You'll have to turn in your find. No matter what you gave the Afghan National Bank, they'd assume you had kept some for yourself. Now, let us take charge of the gems, and the bank won't hear of them."

"Naturally not," Peale observed. "And we'd be in no position to admit we surrendered them to you. You'd be quite safe."

"We understand each other," Nadir said. "Where are they?"

Daggett yawned. "See those shovels? Get i.. and dig yourself some rubies, the way we did."

Nadir got up. He gestured to the soldiers who had approached, and said to Daggett, "So that you do not try anything impulsive, I am having my men seize your firearms. Think it over while we search your gear. If we do have to take you to Kabul, you will not enjoy it."

"Go ahead and search."

Covered by several carbines, Peale and Daggett watched the soldiers round up all the firearms in camp. Daggett said to the colonel, "Maybe that packet of little ones will satisfy them. Even so, we have to get to Kabul first. And I think it can be done—"

When he outlined his plan, Peale said, "Worth trying."

JUST as Daggett had expected, the raiders were not content with the small gems which they found. Reimer demanded, "Where are the choice ones? You saw us coming, you had plenty of time to hide them in any o. these grottos, so we'd get nowhere peeling you to the buff."

"What makes you think we found anything large?"

Nadir answered, "Large rubies came out of Badakhsha.., centuries ago. Just as Ibn Battuta says. Then Tamerlane came down with his Golden Horde and deported the populations of many cities. Since then, only small gems have been found. So—it is obvious that this forgotten valley is the place for large ones. Tunnels in limestone: big rubies in pockets. The only reason for your leaving is because you must have discovered something most important!"

"The location is all yours. We've not exhausted it."

"Don't take me for a chump!" Reimer snapped. "I know as well as you do that no citizen, much less a foreigner, can stake a claim the way you can in the States. Government takes all."

Nadir said, smoothly, "See what my men are making out there?"

Two of the retainers were lashing freshly cut poplar branches together to make an oversized sawhorse. A third trimmed twigs from slender branches the thickness of a man's thumb.

Peale muttered, "The old bastinado. You'd not presume to such an outrage!"

Reimer chuckled. "British subjects are below par, these days. Quit living in the past, Colonel."

The victim, barefooted and ankles noosed, would be hoisted toward the crossbar until most of his weight rested on his shoulders. And, lest that be insufficient torment, his feet would be whipped; the tap-tap-tapping, flailing the soles to a pulp, would shred his nerves until flinching from the next impending blow would be as much punishment as the actual slash itself.

"I've seen that before," Daggett said, remembering the natives he had seen flogged until they were twitching wrecks; some, unable to bribe the executioner, were permanently crippled. He glanced at the sun, and saw that it was quite too early for what he had planned. He gave Peale an intent look and said, "Colonel, we are out on a limb. Let us get it over with, *now*. Why take a beating, and then come across, when we can save ourselves a nasty crippling by settling *now*."

"Er . . . the old American maxim, do it *now*." Peale shrugged fatalistically. "Very well, my boy, let it be *now*."

This pleased the enemy, as did Daggett's implied admission that he had found an important ruby. He retreated toward Zayda's grotto, saying, "I'll show you."

The two advanced eagerly as Peale moved with Daggett. Zayda left her fire to make way. Once inside the dusty cavity, Daggett put his back against the wall. Nadir and Reimer, both armed, stopped and regarded

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him expectantly, as though there remained only for him to pluck the treasure from a crevice.

"Truth is," he said, "it's right where you could have taken it, for the reaching." He side-stepped toward the entrance, and squatted at the fire, which was now down to embers winking through a deep blanket of ash. "I'll show you—"

He fingered the edge of the pot; he exclaimed, grabbed a scarf from the garments on Zayda's sleeping rug, and muffled his hands. His foolish-seeming and fumbling gestures made the faces of Nadir and Reimer ripen into a fine glow of anticipation.

"In the pot," he pattered, as he got a firm hold. "You might have got it with your tea."

"You'd never have thought of that," Peale cut in, wryly, yet as if salvaging a shred of satisfaction.

Nadir and Reimer craned their necks. They went wide-eyed. Daggett, head averted shifted from slow motion to quick; his abrupt change of pace caught them off guard. With a jerk, he slopped most of the water on the coals. There was an explosive puff of steam, a blinding cloud of ash blown up and into the faces of the raiders. Steam and ash filled the mouth of the grotto, making a screen through which, for a moment or so, the riflemen outside could not see.

The eruption evoked only a sputter and a coughing. Then, as though jet-propelled, Daggett and Peale closed in. With knee and eye gouge, the colonel reduced Nadir to silence. Daggett, who had long ached for the chance, walloped Reimer. The blow smacked his head against the stone wall.

Gasping, they rolled the pair through thinning vapor and into the angle beyond the entrance jamb. They had snatched both revolvers before the guards sensed something was wrong. Then a volley raked the crypt; but Daggett answered, "One move out of any of you, and your sahibs get their throats cut!"

AT SUNSET, the guards began to broil mutton. They had their rifles piled, helter-skelter, near the muddle of saddles and bridles. Hobbled horses grazed at random. The supply and excavation gang had run out at the first sign of trouble, nor had anyone tried to stop them; whatever story they took home with them, Yar Ali would not interfere with the doings of an official person from Kabul.

"That *shashlik* smells good," Daggett remarked, pointedly.

"We can do without food as long as you can," Reimer retorted.

Jang and Gul Mast came out of their grotto. Though the troops gave them bread and grilled meat, they would not let them take any to those in the cave. After the two had eaten, they were herded back into their own crypt. The sight of Jang reminded Daggett of the next step; he nudged Peale into a corner and asked, "Your man speaks Kashmiri or Nepalese or some such jargon, doesn't he?"

"Quite right."

"Do you?"

"Of course. To say nothing of Gujarati, Urdu, Pukhtu—"

"Swell! After I got us in here, I realized I'd need more than mental telepathy. I've been worried—my grand idea did seem too much like painting ourselves into a corner. Anyway, tell him to cut up a couple sticks of dynamite, put them into empty beef cans, short fuse them, and heave away at that huddle by the fire."

"Awkward if one of those beggars understood me."

"Oh, hell, Colonel! Tell 'em in Jang's language we'll give 'em a hundred thousand rupees for a ten-hour head start. If that doesn't get a rise, you'll know they didn't understand."

"I say, most ingenious!"

The colonel went to the entrance and addressed the group. They regarded him blankly. He tried another tack. They made gestures to indicate that he had gone crazy from fright. He delivered an oration, but without getting anyone to come up to negotiate.

"I'm quite sure they didn't understand a word."

"Well, give Jang a shout."

"My dear fellow, what do you think I was saying all that while? He'd hardly answer back, would he?"

Daggett went to the entrance to distract the guards. "Your *sahibs* will starve with us. Once they get good and hungry, they'll tell you to let us go. Let us go now."

The leader, irritated and also impressed

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by the awkwardness of the situation, shouted in reply, "O Man! I carry out my orders. When the *sahibs* command, I will obey."

"They can't give any orders, I've gagged them and tied them. Come in and turn them loose. All we have is their pistols."

"I take no orders from you."

"If there is another earthquake, it will be bad for them."

"Wait until the earth shakes again."

Then Jang heaved a tin-can grenade. The men about the fire jerked to their feet. They stared at the sputtering fuse. Jang yelled, "*Khabardar!*" and heaved a second. That did the trick. While any of the group could have grabbed the first bomb, the second created the final touch of confusion. Each left the task to his neighbor, and scrambled for safety. The entire group scattered like quail. The blast speeded them on their way.

Hobbled horses, squealing and snorting and crowhopping, added to the panic. Several broke loose and bolted, bowling men over in the gloom.

Daggett raced for the saddles and the heaped-up rifles.

"Arsenal of democracy," Peale exclaimed, as he followed, to recover the weapons which the enemy had seized only a few hours previously. "I'll take the bolts out of their rifles and fling them hither and yon, while you're saddling up and packing."

"We're in command," Daggett pointed out, "and they know it. Do you really want to risk that trail by night?"

"Moonlight in an hour. And I'll wager Nadir would have mutiny on his hands if he pursued before dawn. But before we go, be sure and get that warrant for our arrest."

"It might come in handy," Daggett said, "When I talk to the *kotwal* in Kabul."

VI

YAR ALI made a very creditable job of not looking surprised at seeing Daggett's party return alone; and after a strictly private and informal dinner, he said, "Some of my people came in saying there had been trouble with Nadir Khan."

Daggett answered, "Yes, about some rubies." He produced the packet of small stones. "We wouldn't turn them over until we had showed them to you. You are the *hakim*—you will bear witness that we could have gone on without mentioning them, but that we reported them to you. You represent the king, out here. Nadir does not."

Yar Ali fingered his beard to a sharp point. "There was trouble about the customs, about breaking and entering. I must detain you until Nadir comes back."

Daggett produced the warrant. "Hold it up to the lamp. See the watermark in the paper, the Frangi lettering. This is paper from the office of Magnus Reimer."

Yar Ali exclaimed, muttered, then spoke to his secretary, who at once got his portfolio and took from it a sheaf of orders from Kabul. He saw at once that Daggett was right. He said, "This is strange—this is very strange—I have nothing more to say—I can not detain you—go in the morning, and with my blessing."

When he returned to the guest room, Zayda said, "I am going to visit Yar Ali's women tonight, I'll tell those battle axes why you didn't want to take me to the forgotten valley."

"Have a good time," Daggett answered. "But don't tell them about the pocket you pointed out, or we'll never get out of here, and the only black lace nightgowns you'll ever see will be in the movies."

In the morning, Daggett learned that there was no gasoline in their truck for the first leg of the trip. With a thousand apologies, Yar Ali explained that he had borrowed the vehicle for a short drive around the more accessible parts of his territory. He would send men to Khanabad, on the main caravan route from Kabul to Kashgar, to buy more. Meanwhile his house belonged to his guests.

Daggett pretended to gulp the story, but he said to Peale, "That's the run-around. Prepare to sweat. If the worst comes to the worst, we can give Yar Ali one big ruby."

Peale teeth set and gritted audibly. "Let's get horses and push on. Send for the truck later, or abandon the blasted thing!"

Daggett snorted. "You'd have to start a stud farm and breed us some nags! All he'd have to do would be to ride to Khanabad and phone ahead to have us stopped, if this gas shortage really is a piece of finagling."

"By Jove, you're too right," Peale admitted, glumly.

Daggett spent a day which promised to give him ulcers; high blood pressure had

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become an old story. He had posted Gul Mast and Jang in the watchtower, turn and turn about, to look for the first sign of Nadir's approach. The following day was even worse. And when, a few hours before noon of the day thereafter, gas arrived from Khanabad, he could hardly believe that the suspense had ended; in fact, he knew that it would not end until he reached Kabul.

AS THEY put Yar Ali's robat behind them, Daggett said to Peale, "I still have a lot of bumps ahead of me. Even with this forged warrant, I'll need some headwork to break up the Nadir-Reimer team, and the red tape they can unreel. You can leave the country and outsmart them—I can't."

"If you're worrying about that ruby," Peale admitted, "converting it into cash would be difficult."

"Plenty! There'll be spies camping on my heels. Everyone will be worried about that, and will be afraid to deal with me. Except by paying so little that a man could afford to bribe his way into the clear and still show a good profit."

"Hmmm—Steve, I can't give you cash, if only because making such a draft would be dead giveaway. But I can dispose of it for you in—well—New York, Antwerp, Amsterdam—if you don't mind trusting me with it, though it'd be a frightful responsibility, and I'm sure I'd not beg for it. Or be offended if you'd rather not risk it."

"I'll think it over. Fact is, an answer is shaping up. Since I'm not going back to the States—not until and unless those heels knock me out of the ring."

And then, seeing the roadblock, he cursed the earthquake which had tumbled a hundred thousand tons of rock from the steep slope and across the road, where it entered a ravine. Since the road followed a shelf overhanging a stream, there was no chance of swinging wide to detour. Donkey drivers and camel "pullers" had already cleared a snaky path through the debris. This indicated that the tremor which had exposed the ruby jackpot had blocked the main trail.

"We'll be here a week, manhandling boulders."

"Back track, and get horses," Peale suggested.

A tire began to thump; standard practice, since the road was paved with horseshoe nails, and hobnails from the boots of caravan men. Changing a tire on such an incline required that the wheels be choked, and the axle supported. Finally, the flat had to be fixed then and there.

Zayda emerged from the luggage to unkink her bones. Jang and Gul Mast, who had been getting a relief from the wheel, wormed themselves out of their nests. Everyone was in motion when a volley raked the hood.

To say that Daggett had expected an ambush would have been wide of the mark, yet, now that it had happened, he was by no means as amazed as he might have been. This, he realized as he grabbed the rifle from the ledge behind the seat, was the completion of a pattern. Ignition was cut, and the handbrake already set; nothing to do but dive for cover.

Peale was on the ground, trying to move and getting nowhere. Daggett caught a flash of Zayda vanishing over the shoulder. Jang and Gul Mast had flattened out, and were squirming for bigger boulders. Each had grabbed a gun.

"Matter, colonel, nick you?"

"The beggars had all of Badakhshan to hit," he grumbled, "and couldn't help drilling my leg."

Daggett wiped blood from his eyes. A bullet jacket or a chip of glass had slashed his forehead. He twisted and got a wormseye view of the rock slide and the upper slopes. The volley had come from the left front, and well up. For the moment, the men in ambush had no target except the truck itself. Turbanned heads appeared.

"Nadir Khan's private army. How's that leg, Colonel?"

"Can't tell. Numb. Don't think any bones messed up."

"Bleeding much?"

"I'll put on a tourniquet."

Daggett crawled toward the step and reached into the dash compartment for the first aid kit. High up, someone shouted a warning. A shot thumped through the floorboards and smacked against the transmission. Oil dripped to the ground. Once out, he handed Peale the kit, then flattened in the shelter of the front wheel.

Gul Mast cautioned, "Watch, some come down now."

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"You take the left. All right—let 'em have it!"

He fired. A man tumbled headlong, rolled and bounced from rock to rock. Gul Mast's shot was followed by the fire-siren screech of a ricochet. Instead of answering with a volley, the enemy ducked.

Daggett went to give Peale a hand. "This is worse than you let on. Nothing to do but backtrack. Can't change that tire."

"Impossible, under fire."

"There's a chance, after dark. Yar Ali can get us to Khanabad. Furnish horses to carry you."

"Think they'll allow us till sundown?"

"So far, not much trouble keeping them where they are."

"This is a finish fight," Peale went on, grimly. "Don't want our story to get to Kabul. You can't get that truck backed up to the crest without being riddled. They'd crowd us in the dark, they can move faster afoot than you can back up. Riddle us point-blank, and no risk at all."

"Do some more thinking, Colonel, while I buck up the morale with Jang and Gul Mast. They may have ideas.

"Only sensible idea is to go over the side and take to their heels. While they have a chance."

THE colonel had summed it up all too accurately. Even if he were able to walk, the entire party, setting out afoot, would be hunted down before coming within sight of Yar Ali's *robat* or of the main caravan road.

"Don't waste any cartridges," Daggett told Jan and Gul Mast. "Wait for a sure shot."

The occasional clatter of sliding rocks indicated that Nadir's men were working downgrade, probably to get into position to riddle the truck, fore and aft: and in such case, the travelers would have no shelter whatever. The bed of the stream would offer no cover. And flight upgrade would be checked by the first volley.

Daggett saw a chance of stampeding the attackers, but to do so required that Jang and Gul Mast back his play to the limit. This would take salesmanship, or else he'd panic them instead of the enemy. But before he explained his notion, he crept to the shelf which sheltered Zayda.

After summing up the situation, with all its danger, he added, "You're near your uncles' territory, and you have a chance of getting out of here before things get too hot. You can move fast. We can't, we have to carry the colonel. And you might as well take this ruby."

"Maybe American women frighten easily, but that's not *our* way."

This was her party, and she was sticking to a finish. Her voice and her gaze embarrassed him. "Look here, you idiot! There isn't—there hasn't—I mean, we aren't really—"

She smiled at his awkwardness. "Of course we're not lovers, but that makes no difference. Do you mean your women have to be love-dizzy or else they are no good at all? And keep your ruby!"

"Have it your way, then!"

"I'm staying. That's disobeying orders. And that is Afghan grounds for divorce, and you can divorce me right now, say the words, like this—"

"And when I've said them, you'll do just as you damn please!"

She smiled impishly, and he gave it up as a bad job. Then, leaving her, he wondered what kind of cussedness he'd meet when he talked to Gul Mast.

He lost little time learning. The tall Afridi insisted that in the first place, this was not really an emergency; in the second place, if it were, it would be better to fight it out at the truck; and in the third place, Daggett's plan was suicidal. Jang said nothing at all. When the last chip was laid on the line, he'd be on the job with Colonel Peale.

Daggett finally said, "Well, to hell with you! I'll do it alone."

Crawling, taking advantage of shifting shadow, boulders, and the rocky buttress which loomed over the truck, he crossed the trail and without having been spotted. Glancing back, Daggett saw that Zayda had crossed, and that Gul Mast was following.

Jang yelled and fired. A puff of rock dust spurted from the rim of the slide. Half a dozen answering shots smashed into the truck. This distraction, as well as the treachery of gathering shadows, protected Daggett as he clawed his way up the steep incline to flank the enemy.

Then, behind him, he heard a gusty roar. The truck was afire. Shots aimed at Jang

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had riddled the gas tank; sparks struck by glancing slugs had ignited spilled fuel. Already, the column of fire was tainted by the black fumes of rubber and grease. Daggett could see neither Jang nor Peale. Neither, apparently, could the enemy, for they yelled, and poked their heads from cover to see which way the blaze was driving the stranded passengers.

VII

HAVING escaped notice during the first twenty yards had been a small miracle. Each succeeding gain convinced Daggett that his luck was turning. He was lightheaded now from the conviction that he could not lose. No more worry or qualm as to what might happen in Kabul because of shooting up several citizens. He was of one mind, and Kabul was a long way off.

Then, behind him, a rifle whacked.

Gul Mast, tempted by a target, had cut loose. A man rolled down the rockslide. Good shot; but it stymied the surprise. Daggett found shelter just in time to escape the fusillade which peppered the slope.

Gul Mast was clawing dirt. His rifle slid down grade. It came to a stop yards below him. It seemed that he did not know whether to pull himself back toward the boulder behind which Zayda had found cover, or to roll down to join his gun. Apparently the shock of a wound had slowed his wits as well as his body.

Bullets kicked up dirt beyond him. His lying flat on the grade made him a difficult target for marksmen below. Those trying to make allowance were raking the earth some yards short of him.

"Help him!" Zayda cried.

The misery in her voice came near knifing Daggett into action; but there was another wounded man to consider. Suicide would help neither Gul Mast nor Peale.

Daggett steeled himself against the outburst of abuse he expected; Zayda's blood chilling invective which had prodded the Afridi into joining the attempt. For a moment, her eyes and face made him think she was about to scramble up to claw him, point him out to the enemy. She did neither. Reading his resolution, she collapsed, and lay face to the ground, sobbing.

Then she got up, cat quick. She faced the snipers, and challenged the men lurking in the jungle rocks.

"Shoot me too, dog-lovers!" she cried, and deliberately made for Gul Mast. "Pork eaters! Pig lovers!"

The firing stopped only when she was so near the fallen Afridi that bullet driven chips of rock jerked at her red pantaloons.

Then she was beside him, and sheltering him.

"So *that's* the way it is," Daggett muttered. "Called him every dirty name so he'd follow me, and not be shown up."

In the small shred of time that followed, he was relieved to realize that the wife problem had been solved. Also, he had his moment of regret and let down. Then, from below, two shots broke the lull. Regardless of wound, Peale was in action, and Jang with him. One slug, fantastically high, searched the rocky palisade which towered above the talus. It reached the quarter from which, if Daggett won it, would get him into position to enfilade Nadir's crew.

Daggett dashed across five open yards, and dropped behind cover.

Whack! Another shot from the road. Even allowing for failing light, swirling smoke, and firing upgrade, Jang, a retired

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soldier, should not be shooting so far over the mark.

"Lucky if he doesn't wing me," Daggett muttered, and squinted to size things up. "Two in the magazine, and two spare clips —they've got to do the job."

Whack!

He can't see me—it can't be me he's pegging away at now.

Right ahead, a man yelled. He bounded out of a crevice and into full view. He had a holstered pistol. His cheek bled from the graze of a fragment. The blood stood out strong against his pallor. Magnus Reimer, Daggett realized the moment he recognized him, had lurked in safety until the Gurkha mountaineer's keen eyes had spotted him.

It was a face-to-face surprise. Daggett had neither time nor room for a shot from the hip. Reimer had all the space he needed for drawing his pistol, but amazement and dismay made him fumble. His mouth moved, and Daggett had the queer feeling that Reimer was trying to say, "Look out, he's shooting at us."

Daggett said, "Hello, Magnus, you lousy double-crosser."

Smiling a little, he made an upward clip with his rifle butt. The move broke Reimer's paralysis. With a choked cry, he came in to meet the butt-strike. The blow, having been checked almost at the start, was not a knock-out as it should have been.

Reimer nearly got his pistol clear when Daggett dropped the momentarily useless rifle. He blocked the draw, and at the same time uncorked a punch. He lifted it right from the narrow shelf on which they had met, and he drove it home. Reimer staggered back, wobbly legged, and made a halting, weaving reach for his pistol. The earthquake-cracked rock yielded. A chunk of ledge, two feet wide and perhaps thrice as long, broke off.

Reimer fell with what had been his footing. Though not a long drop, it sufficed. When he came to rest, there was not enough kick left in him to start any fragments rolling. He lay there, limp as a rag doll.

"That's it," Daggett said, and retrieved his rifle.

Reimer's body jerked. There was slapping sound. Jang, following through, had scored a hit on a dead target, but Daggett was willing to split the credit.

He was comfortably set to whittle down the turbanned men who exchanged shots with Jang and Peale, now that they figured they had only a woman and a helpless Afridi facing the ridge, when a fusillade cut loose from beyond the earthquake debris. Judging from the hammering and blasting, a dozen or twenty men were hard at it.

Whoever they were, they had achieved a total surprise. What was left of Nadir's men now had an uphill climb for their lives, to get to the horses they had probably left up on the distant rim. Daggett had several good targets, but he was filled up with shooting. Let Yar Ali's men, if such they were, carry the ball. Their enthusiasm rated a good play.

Jang came up out of the smoke. Zayda left Gul Mast, and scrambled toward the bearded men who, having put the survivors to flight, capered about the rocks. They were looting, salvaging guns, bandoliers, clothing. And when Daggett joined the group, he learned that his guess had been wrong. These were the retainers of Azim and Afzal, Zayda's shaggy uncles.

Gul Mast hobbled after Zayda. His head was bandaged. A grazing bullet had knocked him witless for awhile, but his eyes were in focus again, and he grinned and hailed Daggett, who could make little of the rapid exchange between Zayda and her uncles.

Gul Mast explained, "They see the smoke, they hear the guns, they are afraid Yar Ali will raise hell for another feuding. So they came to see. When they see the truck, they know it is you and Zayda. So they got to help, she is their niece, you are one of the family, too, now."

After Daggett greeted Afzal and Azim, Zayda confirmed Gul Mast's explanation. "You are an infidel, I am considered almost as much, and a nuisance also, but, they are still my uncles—oh, yes, and they cut Nadir's throat, he was hit and couldn't run fast enough."

"Tell your uncles we're in a hurry to get to Kabul. For our health. Maybe they know a short-cut to the main road, where we can ride a government freight line truck. I don't say Yar Ali kept us at his *robat*, waiting for gas, so Nadir could ambush us, but he might've been playing safe, playing both ends against the middle, at least by sending

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someone to tell Nadir to stay away from the *robat*. So the decision, wherever and whatever it was, would be far from his place."

Zayda agreed with his surmise, and then made a deal with her uncles. For a pair of rifles, plus all the loot they had won from the fallen, they'd be happy to oblige.

BY THE time they reached Kabul, Zayda was resigned to the fact that as far as Daggett was concerned, her chances of going to the United States were zero; and this, along with his plans for the ruby, combined to convince her that Americans were crazy.

"You're absolutely right, honey. I'm not like those gents on the screen. Fact is, neither is anyone else. And what can I do with a ruby as big as a good-sized grape? Suppose I did take it to the States to sell it, by the time the income tax collector got through with me, I'd not have enough to count.

"And suppose I gave it to you for a wedding present? You're really entitled to a divvy. But whether you kept it or sold it, you'd run a big risk of getting jammed up with the law. So I'm turning it in, and collecting whatever bonus there is for reporting a mineral deposit."

"My boy, you're quite mad!" Peale exclaimed. "Even after your income tax collector had done plucking you, back home, you'd have at least half the net proceeds, which'd be no bagatelle!"

Daggett shook his head. "It wouldn't be hay, Colonel. But the ruby business is a one-time play. So here is how I'll do it—I'll take it to the *kotwal*, acting dumb, as if I didn't know it ought to go to the Afghan National Bank. If he's as level as he seems, he'll steer me right, and from then on, I'll have a reputation with him. He packs weight in this man's town. If he is not one-hundred-percent honest according to our ways of looking at things, he'll figure it for a present, and just turn in the little ones. Either way, I'll be fixed solid as far as bureaucrats are concerned, and if Atlas Trading Company sends another stinker to take Reimer's place, I'll have the deck stacked against him. He won't have a chance.

"All in all, that grape-sized ruby is a better investment that way, and I'll get my money back and redouble it, by staying in business in Kabul."

He turned to Zayda and Gul Mast. "You two stay here with Colonel Peale, I'll be back directly. I'm going to see the *kotwal*."

When he returned to Peale's quarters, Daggett announced, "It worked. The ruby and the forged warrant did it. My warehouse is unsealed, and the old boy has set his spies to work locating the stuff Reimer side-tracked. Yes, and I got the bonus. Which is something you and I are not splitting."

"Er—I can't complain at all. Fact is, I'm indebted to you, even after I've settled up for the truck, and your salary. Frightfully indebted," Peale went on. "I'm convinced that mining rubies on a commercial scale simply can't pay, no more than it did in Burma. So there's no point to my saying that since I am leaving as soon as this blasted leg permits, you're very welcome to take all of any ruby mining concession you might wangle from the government."

"Tell you what you can do, Colonel."

"Please do."

"You write Persian, as well as read it."

"Oh, quite," he answered, "to say nothing of Uighur—"

"And Tamil and Gujarati," Daggett cut in. "Jang, I think the colonel wants his writing kit." And when Jang had brought ink and paper and sharpened reeds, Daggett said, "Colonel, write this for Zayda, my perfectly lawful wife: a one-hundred-percent lawful bill of divorce."

Peale gulped. "I say, but you're a bit hasty, aren't you?"

"Far as she's concerned, I'm not hasty enough. Write it!"

And then Daggett said, "Gul Mast, I still don't know and can't figure out why she risked a hatful of bullets to keep you from being shot up, but I think she must be fond of you. And I think she's got Hollywood out of her system completely. For a wedding present, you get the mineral discovery bonus I've collected." He turned to Zayda. "No minks, no Cadillac, but in the next shipment from the States, I'll have a dozen black lace nightgowns for you."

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Dignity Is Rust; It Freezes Things. Humor Is Oil; It Helps Things Move. Aboard Ship That Happens, Too

Two On The Mate

By RICHARD HOWELLS WATKINS

LUCKILY Gene Dwight, the mate, was standing by on the lower bridge to see if Captain Grant would give out about the big blow that was framing up. The skipper merely shot a frosty glance at him and then, fumbling his feet at the head of the ladder, tripped and fell. Gene got going like a jet.

The husky Old Man tried too hard to land with ship-masterly dignity. He did three complete convulsions tensely in mid air, which is never right. The deck was steel plating. Captain Grant was reaching for it with his chin.

Gene Dwight fielded him on the dead run. Gene's arms and legs were thick spars. They bent under the strain. Gene hit the hot deck. The Old Man thudded down on him.

"Thank you, Mr. Dwight," Captain Grant said coldly. He unangled himself as stiffly as a carpenter's rule and handed the ladder

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a look that would have abashed a Port Said bumboatman.

"Any time, sir," Gene Dwight panted. He curled an ear hopefully, having the weather on his mind.

J. P. Humbert, executive v.p. of the Hingman line—they called him Ancy Pants because he was always on the itch to move—came on the gallop. He had hustled down the ladder ahead of the Old Man, just as much in a hurry to get off the ship as he had been to get on. "Are you all right, Captain Grant?" he asked.

The Old Man took sedate inventory. "Twisted my back somewhat but I believe it is of no consequence, Mr. Humbert."

Ancy Pants, a good enough guy except that he's always popping up by plane in ports where nobody wants him, looked worried. He ran his finger up over his stiff ginger-colored mustache as if he was trying out a toothbrush. The Old Man edged him to the side, firmly saw him off in the agent's launch and walked deadpan past the mate.

Young Gene Dwight shook himself again and grinned. His face looked like something a lazy guy with a dull chisel had quit trying to hack into human semblance out of a cross-grained hunk of iron-wood. Only his sudden grin, which turned on like a light, saved him from being a gargoyle.

For a minute he hooked himself by his elbows to the chain rail. He gave his insides a chance to get back where they belonged. All solid meat, the Old Man was.

"Next time I'll use a catcher's mitt," he told a pelican standing by for scraps. He looked over Flamingo Bay, which opens too widely to the south at the flatter end of Santa Inez island.

A little less northeast trade than usual was ruffling the water. Gene turned northeast, to see that wind climb over the mountains. Only a thinnish bunch of trade clouds were hanging to the mountain peaks and the whole works was surprisingly near and clear. Two ships close by the *High Sierra* were still working cargo onto lighters alongside. The gangs were moving fast.

GENE gave his kidneys a shove to starboard and walked aft to the messroom. In the officers' pantry he poured himself a mug of coffee. The other deck and black-gang stripers having their morning pause in the messroom were drinking iced pop but Gene stuck to his North Atlantic habits. He downed the moke. The bunch were all standing up today. Standing up and fidgetty.

"Come on, Gene; how'd it look?" Tris Powell, the second mate, asked him.

Gene showed them, doing four convulsions in the air and straightening his cap, long-faced, dignified and just like the Old Man, while still falling. He made a good catch of himself before he hit the deck.

"The top trouble, the skipper's got no sense of humor, boys," he said, sitting on the table. "He was on his way, anyhow, so he ought to have made it funny. He'd just have slid. But, no, he had to tie himself all up trying to convince his audience he planned it that way."

He shook his head. "No sense of humor can be bad. Supposing the *High Sierra* was taking her last dunk. Well, a guy like Cap'n Richard Grant would go down with her."

"What's wrong with that?" young Rob Tenney asked a little louder than a Johnny-Come-Lately radio op should talk.

Gene Dwight's grin flicked on.

"Me, my job is to get Number 1 lifeboat away, Sparkie," he said. "I'd be a right fast slave to duty when the old wagon started to settle."

He waved a thumb at Tenney. "But where'd you be?"

"Me?" said Rob Tenney, blushing haughtily at having all the eyes on him.

Gene Dwight curled an arm toward the overhead. "Up in the shack with your feet getting wetter and wetter—that's you. Why? Because the skipper couldn't see that moth-eaten captain-must-go-down-with-the-ship stuff is just a poor joke. And naturally you, Sparkie, being true to the traditions of lightning jerking, you'd be there with earphones on, waiting to leave with a skipper who wasn't thinking of leaving."

Again Gene shook that rock-hewn head of his. "All because of no sense of humor in the old man," he said. "Gurgle-gurgle."

"Huh!" said Rob Tenney. "A radio operator would stay anyhow."

Everybody raised a cheer and Tenney blushed again.

"My aunt's foot!" said the first assistant engineer. He headed for the door. "We got a hero on the articles!"

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"And a good thing, too," said Gene Dwight. "It evens up for me."

Rob Tenney squared his cap. "Don't worry about me!" he said. "I shall do my duty!"

He marched out as dignified as if he was heading a parade in his own honor. It went over big.

Gene Dwight laughed like a foghorn. "No sense o' humor!" he said. "That makes two of 'em."

Tris Powell, the second mate, poked Gene Dwight into a chair with a straight-arm shove. "And speaking of senses of humor, yours is still curdled from the war!" he said.

"A bit mordacious," Henderson, the old chief engineer, said. He threw dictionary words at his shipmates like they were rocks.

"That could be," said Gene Dwight. "In the war—"

THEY laid down their bottles of pop and drifted. Gene had had medals draped on him for the Murmansk run and he wasn't the silent kind you hear about. Give him a loose ear or two and— But right then the ears were scattering fast. Only Henderson, who could stand language in lumps, stayed. "What makes ye rate humor so high?" he asked, getting set for an argument.

"I'll put it in your own lingo, Socrates," Gene said. "Dignity is rust. It freezes things. Humor is oil. It helps things move."

He scrammed, too. Outside he looked at the sky and thrust a leg over the hatch coaming to join the sweepers in Number Two lower. Then he stopped.

The Old Man was starting down the pilot ladder to board a shore boat alongside. He was making heavy weather of it, hitching down one step at a time.

Gene parked on the chain rail near enough to bear a hand or get a word. The Old Man didn't even look his way. Still frozen-faced he made the shore boat and headed the sepia oarsmen for the pier

Two hours later Ancy Pants himself came aboard again. He had Gene Dwight called out of Number Three 'tween decks. He got technical. As well as Gene could figure it the Old Man hadn't broken his back. The hospital had him in a cast. Ancy Pants waved a hand toward the neat white building on the high ground to northward from which Captain Grant might be looking at his ship.

"You will load cargo as soon as those fellows"—Ancy Pants glared at the other two ships—"cease monopolizing all the lighters in this port. And Mr. Dwight"—he dropped his voice—"Captain Grant wants you to inspect your ground tackle at once. The weather to the southeastward is unsettled."

Gene Dwight cocked an eye at the cirrus clouds—feathery stuff a long way straight up.

"Delicately put, sir," he said. "Sparkie was telling us at dinner it was a hurricane. Whether it's better to haul tail out o'here—"

"You have nothing to worry about, Mr. Dwight"—it was still 'mister' not captain. "The agent assures me that Flamingo Bay is known far and wide as Hurricane Haven."

"It all depends on where the wind is, sir," Gene Dwight said. "Rough Roadstead, I'd call it."

"Nevertheless, Mr. Dwight, Captain Grant is confident the *High Sierra* will ride out any unsettled conditions quite comfortably here in the bay," Ancy Pants said.

"How about the skipper taking over at the hospital since he's there and letting me handle the ship, since he ain't here," Gene Dwight said. "This board of old warts ashore who jerk tickets don't believe in remote control."

"I have given you Captain Grant's instructions," Ancy Pants said curtly and hustled ashore.

Gene went into the chartroom and had a long look at the detail of Flamingo Bay, including soundings and kind of bottom. The ship's hands coagulated into little bunches to scuttlebutt, looking over Gene Dwight without quite putting an eye square on him. Gene came wandering into the pantry and turned on the coffee spigot.

"Relax," he said over his shoulder. "Nobody's called me Captain. I'm just ship's husband, as well as I can figure it, with no authority to lift her hook."

Rob Tenney snorted pretty loudly for a kid operator.

"At least that means you don't have to go down with your ship," he said, very tough and a little red around the gills.

Gene Dwight laughed. "You'll have to show a turn o' speed if you're figuring on abandoning when I do, Sparkie," he said.

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He hit the bulkhead with a fist that made her boom, or it seemed so, anyhow. "A ship!" he said. "Any shipyard can sling one together in jig time but where'd they replace me in a hurry?"

"For a start I'd try a nut hatchery," Tris Powell said.

THE ship stayed jumpy. It wasn't only the hurricane, which has a way of knocking out a tune on taut nerves before it hits, but also the remote control skipper.

It began to cloud up. That night it got showery and gusty. A long low swell came rolling in the bay.

Gene Dwight kept plotting the course of the blow by the radio reports. Next morning he secured everything loose on deck with double lashings.

Before noon he got the last of three reports that put the course of the blow in a straight line running through Santa Inez. A disturbance of small area, accompanied by winds of hurricane intensity, they called it. The barometer slid an inch and a half in an hour, which meant the thing was getting close. Gene took a turn on the bridge, staring at that white building there on the hill. The hospital just squatted there, looking back at him, blank as the Old Man.

Gene faced the north wind and pointed ten points to the right and that gave him east southeast, which checked swell with radio reports. It was too rough for the other two ships to work cargo. Their crews were busy on deck, snugging down. By then you could lean on the wind as you listened to the tune it played aloft.

Ancy Pants arrived in a bouncing launch, massaging his ginger mustache till it looked like he was giving with a harmonica.

"Well?" said Gene.

"Captain Grant refuses to let this hurricane discompose him," Ancy Pants reported. "He is confident—"

Gene Dwight beat the rail with his fist. He pointed his finger overside and Ancy Pants looked. It had been too tough alongside for the launch. It was hightailing toward the little pier with one guy bailing and another pumping. Ancy Pants was marooned.

"I can't take that toplofty jaw," Gene said. "The skipper's decision is based on his dignity, not the mathematical probabilities of this blow. He don't want even a hurricane to hustle him."

He waved a hand at the wide open south. "Don't he know a rat-trap when he sees one?"

"You are still under his orders," Ancy Pants bawled. "I have no ticket; I myself would not presume—"

"To hang on here is the dignified thing to do an' be damned to it!" Gene said. "Look, mister!"

He shoved an arm out into the northerly wind.

"Now it blows a hair west o' north in the puffs," he said. "Mean anything to you?"

"No!"

Ancy Pants yelled the word in Gene's ear but Gene didn't hear him. A gust had hit the mate a sudden wallop on the left side of his backed-up face.

"Nearer nor' nor'west!" he said aloud. He cupped his hands to his mouth. "Mr. Powell!"

"Right here!" said the second mate.

"Get your anchor! We're leaving town."

"I warn you—" Ancy Pants began but Gene Dwight was already blowing up the ladder toward the bridge. Old Henderson hadn't been in sight all morning. When Gene called the engine room it was Henderson who answered, and fast.

"Aye," he said, noncommittally when he got the news. "There's what head o' steam the boilers are good for, as ye asked."

Though a sizable harbor chop was running the wind was blowing right off shore and the *High Sierra* still lay steady as a rock.

Tris Powell and the boatswain heaved in her anchor. She turned her stern to shelter and headed toward the open sea. Gene Dwight rang her up to full ahead. Sudden rain out of the black clouds above sluiced her decks from fantail to forecastle head.

Ancy Pants crawled up into the wheelhouse, dripping. But Gene Dwight was too busy, in and out on the bridge, to argue.

"It's a hard chance but the easiest one in sight," was all he would say to the company's v.p. To Tris Powell he megaphoned, "Get all hands up off that deck. It'll be dusty outside."

So southward the island dribbled away between a couple of low, rocky arms with scattered reefs and sandbars.

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Gene Dwight kept her hugging the west side of the buoyed channel that ran southward. And when the channel made a turn to the southwest he kept edging her over to the westerly edge of the deep water. She was not too happy about that wind and sea for she was light. A couple of thousand more tons of freight would have helped.

Things like that happen fast. The wind screamed up to a shrill peak, backing as it picked up speed. It was one of those winds men argue about; whether there *are* winds of such power.

The blast hit the highsided ship square on the beam. It was no momentary gust; it was a mighty hand shoving her broadside across the narrow channel and neither wheel nor propeller could do anything for her. A sandbank was waiting for her on the other side.

She took the sand along her full length and wind and sea leaped at her, heeling her over and pouring solid water across her shelter deck.

The seas began smashing her over. Gene Dwight, the helmsman and Ancy Pants were all scrambled and floundering down in the leeward side of the wheelhouse. The slant of the deck was too steep to get back on hands and knees.

"I won't forget—if I come through this," Ancy Pants snarled at Gene Dwight. "You left a sheltered harbor—and destroyed your ship!"

"That's what," said Gene Dwight through his teeth. "Didn't last long in command, did I?"

That granite face of his looked gray enough to be limestone now. He hitched himself up to a wheelhouse window for a narrow-eyed squint at the seas driving over her. She was on too hard, over too far on her beam ends to pound. They had seconds to save their lives in that crazy, rising sea.

"Pass the word," Gene said to the helmsman. "Abandon ship! Port lifeboat."

He started climbing up toward the whistle lanyard. A dirty tune, "Abandon ship."

Nobody had been caught out on deck. Men had been hurt but not swept overside. Gene got the storm oil tanks streaming. That lifeboat should ride anything. It wouldn't last long on the davits.

Gene hustled them into the boat hanging low out over the slanting side. Nobody disagreed with the way he'd sized things up. Anxiously he counted noses. Flying water made counting hard.

"Thirty-nine! Who's the missing man? Where's the radio op? Where's Tenney?"

Nobody answered. Henderson looked at Gene, his wrinkled old face sardonic.

"It's still a joke if it is on me," Gene said tautly. He tapped Tris Powell's arm.

"Hang on till it gets too tough," he said, grabbed the davit and swung aboard the ship. With broken water hammering at him he started the climb along the deck and up it to the radio shack. The wind kept trying to pick him off like a ripe apple off a tree.

Near the shack, aft of the wheelhouse, he raised his head and saw the white face of Rob Tenney peering out the porthole.

Urgently Gene motioned to him. The radio operator screeched something. Gene didn't like the look of his face, exalted, wild.

He climbed up, got a grip on the rim of the port and glanced in, close to the young op's face.

"Get going!" Gene shouted. "Didn't you hear 'Abandon'?"

"Who can take it?" Rob Tenney shouted hysterically at him.

Gene shoved an arm through the port, trying for a calming grip on his shoulder. But Tenney jerked back.

"Look!" Gene said through his teeth. "Forty men are waiting for you, with their necks out. Come on, Sparkie! Forty men!"

"I locked the door!" he said. "It jammed when the ship went over! You go on! I can take it—like I said!"

Gene grunted. He peered aft. The boat was still waiting.

"Put on a vest," he said and started hitching along toward the wheelhouse. He jerked the fire-ax out of its fitting and scrambled back along the cockeyed passage.

Everything was scrambled. He had trouble getting footing. But it was a fine hefty ax. He swung it at Sparkie's door. The superstructure was really strained. He had to chop the door into chunks and wrench each piece clear. Time went by in spite of him. While he worked the ship gave a lurch that dumped him on his face. He struggled up.

Tenney was helping on the other side of the door. The remnants of the thing

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fell over suddenly on Gene. He pitched over the weather board onto the deck and slid, sprawling, toward the rail. He saved himself with grabbing hands. Next instant Tenney tumbled and nearly knocked him loose.

The guys in the boat were still hanging on, with men manning the falls. Tough waiting! Gene shoved the op aft ahead of him and Tenney worked his way along. For an instant Gene stopped, turned forward and lifted his head. Stinging spray belted his scowling face. He crabbed around and followed Tenney. Water and wind kicked him along after the op.

Tenney reached the boat. Quick hands jerked him aboard. The ship was no longer almost on her beam ends; she was rolling a little and the lifeboat hanging by its tackles was oscillating like the pendulum of a cuckoo clock over the oil-filmed water alongside.

Gene Dwight paused by the forward davit. His squinting eyes assayed the streaks of foam tailing down wind on the surface of the writhing sea. Full throated voices shouted at him against the wind. Tris Powell's face got grim. Ancy Pants' mouth was moving.

Gene leaned toward the iron-faced second mate. He jabbed his arm into the wind. The wind was hammering at them from the starboard bow. Not broad on her beam! That was why she was lifting, not hard down. Weird, the speed of that shift. But then it was the speed of a wind shift that had slammed her on the sandbank.

"Out o' the west!" Gene Dwight bawled. "Get it, Tris? A four point shift since she grounded!"

Tris seemed to absorb it but the A.B.'s tending the davit falls were getting jumpy. They had hung on long enough. Any moment they might throw off a turn of the line and begin lowering the lifeboat into the oil-eased sea below. One of them beckoned Gene aboard. There was a hard "or else" jerk to his finger.

Gene curled his leg around the davit and cupped his hands.

"She'll lift before she cracks! You're safer aboard! All hands!"

There was doubt and confusion in the lifeboat. Once you've taken to the boat—Hard-pressed, that bunch were with the screaming gale tearing at their heads.

GENE DWIGHT put his back to them and went scrambling away from the boat. Alone he could do nothing. But with a chance to save her, he could not abandon. Stuck with the role of hero!

"Another one on me," he told himself, flashing a very sour grin.

He made the wheelhouse and glanced back out of the corner of his eye.

Tris Powell was sold. He was tapping the shoulder of the man at the after fall with a sort of heavy shackle he'd caught up from the bottom of the boat. He pointed to the *High's* deck. Forward, one kid ordinary seaman was already leaping back to the ship's rail and Henderson was moving. Among the bunched men in the boat a dozen arms were lined up along the wind's new direction and jaws were going.

Gene Dwight watched the wind. Already it was working south of west in the gusts. He could figure from that the center was blasted close, very small, but to northward of the *High Sierra,* spinning on its way from tropic doldrums to high latitudes. To northward!

The ship was pounding hard, lifting and falling as the mighty wind slammed at her. But it could not kill her; could not smash her over and gut her with big seas and drive her under in deeper water beyond the bank. Not from the new direction, it couldn't.

The men in the boat came aboard with a rush, clutching and scrambling on the jarring ship. They clustered in what lee they could find, flattened out on the deck until Henderson led a small bunch of blackgang men to the head of the engineroom ladders.

Gene, ducking heavy water blasted off the white surface, clung to the cockeyed bridge, watching the down-wind streaks on the water. Ancy Pants hung on inside the wheelhouse, close to the door. Tris Powell waited by the bridge ladder. An A.B. crouched by the wheel.

Gene could do nothing; wind and sea had taken her over, but he watched those streaks. The wind was coming in dead ahead, now, and her bottom was grinding on the sand. Lifting; she was lifting that port side!

He fought over to the telegraph and shoved the handle to "Stand By." Back from the engineroom came an answering jingle. Henderson was on the job.

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Gene pointed his hard face toward the bow again. For the first time he felt what he had been praying for, the wind battering his left cheek harder than it hit his right. Still shifting! No longer dead ahead. It was beginning to hit her port bow. It was slapping her back as it had slapped her down. It was driving sluicing seas in between the sandbank and her side. It was forcing her backward and into the channel again.

Gene planted a hand on the handle of the telegraph and waited. The wind was doing the job; no use in turning over that propeller. There could be coral under that sand. She scraped again and came off.

He sensed the water under her keel and he shoved the telegraph to "Slow Ahead." She carried a bad heel to port; what cargo and permanent ballast there was in her had shifted when she lay about on her beam ends. But she was afloat and—he felt the tremor of her under him despite all the racket of the storm—under way.

He shoved the handle forward; he drove her into it. She just hung there, getting nowhere, then began fighting southward by inches.

Ancy Pants came out to him and looked longingly astern, at Flamingo Bay, dim seen in that black chaos. But he did not speak. Southward! Tough going.

When the wind finally edged right into the south and blew into her teeth it began to lose the keenest of its crazy fury.

She was in deep water, now, and Mr. Henderson had the pumps going, throwing water out of her. She'd be a mess, but she was afloat. Gene kept steerage way on her with the wind easing. Having hit south it stayed there. And Gene Dwight obstinately kept her nose to it, watching the barometer rise, reckoning the strength of that gale. One hour. Two hours. Three hours.

THE wind eased to no more than a stiff trade breeze. Gene Dwight turned once more toward Flamingo Bay.

Ancy Pants edged up to Gene, played a silent tune on his ginger mustache and looked down at the ravaged deck.

"I'm sorry, Mr. Dwight, but you disobeyed orders," he said. "You behaved well but it was your stubbornness that got us into this mess. There's nothing I can do for you."

Gene Dwight nodded. His grin split his unlikely face. Tris Powell had counted noses again and he had lost no mean.

"You're right," he said. "I should lose my ticket. But for not putting to sea sooner."

Ancy Pants went over into the wing of the bridge and tut-tutted such crass obstinacy.

Rob Tenney stuck his head out of his shack, looking older and brighter. Gene spared him a grin. A small one.

The *High Sierra* limped into Flamingo Bay. Tris Powell, on the fore deck, uttered a yelp and shoved out a hand toward something in the rain and murk a couple of points on the port bow. It was one of the two steamships which rode it out in the bay.

Her bridge, funnel and masts showed above the water. She lay on the bottom to northward of a reef. That ledge must have taken her bottom out as she dragged to northward when south wind and south sea came storming in that broad entrance.

Gene Dwight nodded. "The other fellow was luckier," he said, staring at the beach alongside the place where the little landing pier had been.

There was a ship high and dry with her stern across the waterfront street. She had broken her back and was a long, tough, expensive salvage job from enough water to float her.

The hurricane had done a job in Flamingo Bay. Gene Dwight glanced at the hill. The hospital had ridden it out safely, anyhow.

Ancy Pants was gasping. Finally he contrived a sickish smile.

"Speaking of jokes," he said, "I guess I ought to apologize for—"

"Jokes is right," said Gene Dwight grimly. "If it hadn't been for Sparkie taking one too seriously and rusting up in that shack o' his I'd have lost my ship, too."

He shook his head at himself. "Too dignified; that's me. Instead of telling you and the skipper to go to hell in a wheelbarrow I stalled around—I wouldn't kid you, mister; I should lose my ticket for not putting to sea sooner—"

"Next time I'm sure you will," said Ancy Pants.

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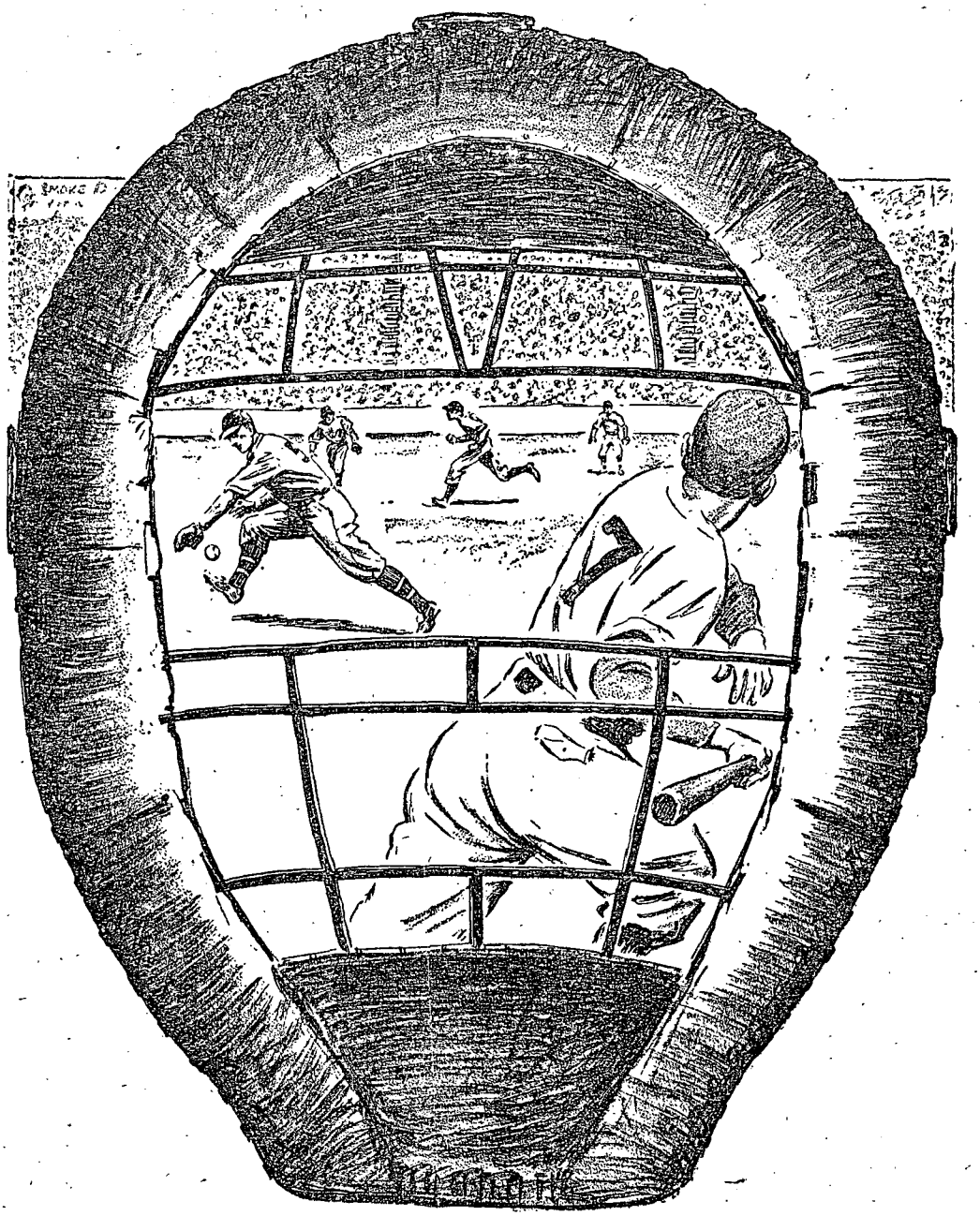

NINE MEN WITH BATS

THE ball came in winging from the pitcher's mound; the Sox batter slid his hands quickly up the ash for the bunt, ball hit bat and dribbled out toward the mound. Two Green Sox were moving on the play, running from first and second. As the Lions' pitcher scrambled off the hill to scoop up the ball, catcher-manager Spike Morell hustled himself out from back of the plate, yelling and pointing to first.

The moundsman looked around—the Soxer from the center sack was steaming into third—the catcher was still hollering

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By
MALCOLM
MURCHIE

Author of
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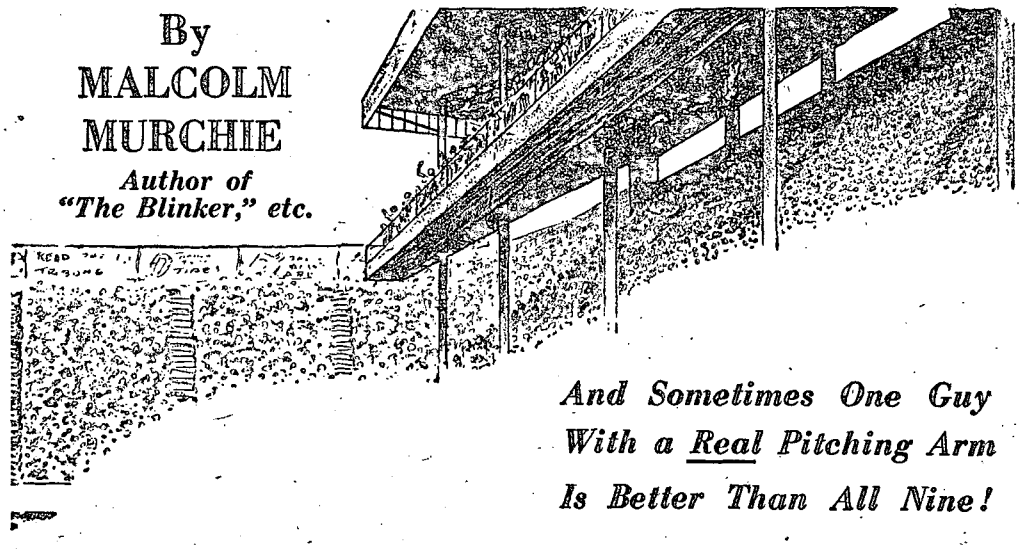

And Sometimes One Guy With a Real Pitching Arm Is Better Than All Nine!

and waving to first. Then the hurler made his decision and throw. It would have been a bang-bang play anyway, but the ball was directly on the bag and it looked good for the force. Tracy at third gloved the ball—then let the sphere pop off the heel of his mitt. The roar from Greenie rooters swelled as the man in blue up the line signaled palms down at the hot corner. Bases were full now with one out.

Morell kept walking toward his pitcher, the stockiness of his solid figure accentuated by the tools of catching. His grim face was dark with anger, his jaw jutted forward dangerously. He motioned for time and reached the pitcher's mound.

"See me pointing down to first? That was where the play shoulda gone. You think I'm out here waving my arm for exercise?"

The hurler started to say something, but manager and catcher Morell shut him up, veins swelling ominously on the broad forehead.

"Don't give me talk, damn you! *You* think you had the play beat at third! I'm running this club! I do the thinking for the team—and that goes even for the smart-alec college-learned bimbos!"

Morell waved lustily to his bullpen then, ignoring the slim, white-faced Lion chucker who stood tightmouthed waiting for the reliefer to come in from deep centerfield. A round of applause went up from the stands as the "Now pitching for the Lions—" announcement was made, and the deposed hurler headed for the clubhouse.

The Lions lost the game. 9-8 in ten innings. Lion supporters shook their heads. If their club couldn't win on its power days, then the outlook seemed bleak indeed was the bleacher sentiment. Too, tradition says that that third Series contest is a big one to win, especially if the first two go's have been split.

IN THEIR own league the Lions had bettered the other teams to win the pennant by ten and a half games. The Morellmen had a lineup of murderous hitters; they played for the big inning and usually got it. Defensive play and pitching were subordinated to the boom-boom of those chocolate brown and yellow wood bats.

The Green Sox copped their bunting more vigorously. It was pet sports writing to say the Greenies had "stolen" their pennant from the rest of the league. The Sox, led by talkative Scratchy Dawes who believed in speed and more speed, were a running club. They had fair pitching, fair power, but defensively they were tight and offensively they ran the arms off opposition catchers, outfielders and infielders. They literally dove their way into the World Series by a narrow one-game margin. They played clawing, scrapping baseball that never said die. And they were young. Youngsters on their way up and getting better every tick of the clock.

The Lions had been around. They had few youngsters; they were veterans, like the MGR himself, thirty-five-year old catcher

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Spike Morell, 195 pounds of backstopping savvy but a guy who spent more time with the heat machines and the trainer than he'd used to in the old days. Didn't they all?

One of the youngsters was the pitcher Spike had heaved out in the hectic tenth of the third Series go after getting one man and throwing to the wrong base. Was it the wrong base? speculated the newsmen. If third baseman Tracy had held the ball—If—it was a big If. One thing was clear. All the boys in the press coop and the fifty thousand spectators at Play Grounds Stadium were witnesses to the fact that Spike Morell had been hollering his lungs out and gesturing frantically that the play was to go to first base.

And the rankest busher just up from Class D knows enough to obey his manager. See, on the playing field it makes no difference that the manager is also your brother!

That was the rub. Tom Morell, ten years younger almost to the day than his hard-bitten brother, Spike, had been pulled in by the Lions as they surged down the stretch.

Red Bell, head of the Lion farm system had taken SOSes from the parent club seriously. It had been on his most emphatic recommendation that Tom came up to the bigtime.

MID-SEPTEMBER then, and pressmen covering the beat noted that MGR Morell seemed less than hilarious when he told them of the new addition. Club handouts on the twenty-five year old Tommy were less reticent. Young Morell had come up to triple A in three years. For two of those he'd led his club in winning percentage, and was most recently the ERA king of the minors.

"This Kid Should Insure Pennant" Red Bell's wire had read. And Bell didn't usually go overboard on youngsters.

Spike Morell had been changing out of his spike shoes when one of the coaches came in after a double-header, leading the tall, slim, good-looking youngster.

"Look who's here, Spike," Coach Doyle had led the rookie over to Morell's locker. The manager had looked up and grunted. Young Tommy had started to offer a hand, then withdrawn it.

Doyle had paid no attention to the skipper's attitude, had taken the new pitcher when the pilot, busy with shoelaces, seemed not to notice, around the dressing room and made introductions. Tom had got a rookie's reception, but a lot of the ringwise veterans had looked beyond the young face that to a ballplaying veteran spells "replacement" and seen there help for that nice fat pennant and series check.

If anybody had noticed or commented on that initial meeting between the two Morell brothers, they would've probably put it this way:

"Hell, you know ballplayers after a doubleheader. Anyway, Spike's not one to go around hugging people, even his own brother." That's how the manager's right-hand man, Coach Doyle, had figured.

People, nosey people like reporters who have to dig up a story every day and so do a lot of thinking about off-field events as well as what takes place on the diamond, had written: "Just look at them. You'd never know they were brothers."

It had been true. Tom stood a shade over six feet, a good three inches more than his brother. But where Spike was built heavily and powerfully, Tommy could carry a couple of practice bats onto the scales with him without pushing it up much beyond the early 160's.

Tom's face was lean, Spike's was broad. Girls looked at slim Tommy and looked again. Girls would look at Spike—and look away. It was like that all the way. The catcher-manager's hands were knobby knuckled and huge. By comparison young Morell's were small, almost frail.

But Tommy had known how to act in the clubhouse and out on the mound. Plenty of kids with rave minor-league records have a lot to say soon as they come up. Meanwhile the veterans, tongue in cheek, wait for the rude awakening that usually shocks Mister Rookie back to reality—and often the minors again.

Tom had let his work speak for itself. He had pitched two September games, won them both, one with a three hit shutout. He also had come in on relief several other times. That was a favorite pastime for the Lions—needing relief in the pitching department. A steady stream of hurlers coming in from the bullpen was the rule, a nine-inning job by any of the chuckers was a rarity.

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"Here's a young man who can go for you all the way or put out a late-inning fire," Farm Head Red Bell had told Spike. And when the manager had taken the comment silently, that was marked down as "family modesty." That was the way the record had run.

And now Spike Morell dressed in silence. The manager-catcher was a competitor. He never took losing gracefully. Particularly one he felt should rightfully have got the Lions off to a vital 2-1 game lead in this Series wherein the Greenies, on the basis of their all-around strength and speed, were heavy betting favorites.

THAT evening the playing manager had a radio date to meet Scratchy Dawes, pilot of the Green Sox. It was one of those things you don't turn down even though Spike, literally a man of few words, dreaded the business. He'd always avoided radio appearances when possible.

The talkative Scratchy who had the voice to go with his nickname and the afternoon's win behind him for a morale booster, got the laughs and most of the applause. Morell, feeling the shirt beneath his suit turning wet with perspiration as he waited his turn at the mike, was miserable.

The master of ceremonies rattled on, finally made a remark about, "Well, folks, so far it seems as though the Green Sox aren't very much afraid of the Lions" (whistles and applause from the audience). "What about that Manager Scratchy Dawes? Aren't you afraid of Lions?"

"Well," said Dawes who could think in words as well as in baseball, "Well, maybe so far it's a case of *sheep* in Lions' clothing!" (The audience howled and the MC turned to his other guest.)

"Now what have you to say to that, Spike Morell, manager of those much-maligned Lions?" Spike, damp-handed and fighting a lump in his throat, got a few unintelligible sounds around the frog. It sounded like the frog talking.

"Step up closer to the mike, Mister Morell." (Audience giggles, not *with* him, Spike was acutely aware, but *at* him.)

There was an uncomfortable silence, and the MC, frowning a little, filled it up. *They were still waiting for him to say something.*

Spike's fist tightened in his trousers pocket, anchored there by the awful self-consciousness of this moment; he was aware that Scratchy was eyeing him amusedly from the other side of the mike. Suddenly Morell thought with deep and terrible resentment that his brother Tom was the one who should be here making with the words. Tom, with his fancy education that he, Spike, had never had; Tom would be smart-alecky enough with the words to match even Scratchy Dawes. The thought angered him, and the anger helped him find his voice.

"We've got a good team," Spike growled hoarsely. "We'll give 'em a battle yet." Then he left the microphone abruptly while the master of ceremonies ad libbed more funniness, some at the Lion leader's expense, Spike thought, the audience clapped and then the whole dreadful thing was over.

Afterward he met Red Bell. The farm system head smiled at his friend, knowing the latter's hatred of public appearances—except at the ball park.

"Don't say it!" roared Spike. "If you listened, *don't* tell me what you thought of it!"

OVER coffee the farm head talked. "Look, Spike, I do my job and you do yours. I wouldn't think of telling you how to run the team—I like to think I do as good a job with the farm clubs."

Morell halved a doughnut. "What's the trouble, Red?" He knew the man well; Bell was not one to fret over trifles. His worried manner meant something was up. And something good-sized.

"It's about Play Grounds Stadium. Spike, Mister Comerford told me only this evening after the game that they're demanding more rent. It amounts to a freeze-out!"

Spike whistled. He'd known it was something big, but as big as their own home stadium—He sat silently, thinking. Of course he'd heard stories. The PG, as they called it, was owned by a combine plus some municipal interests. Lion owner Ralph Comerford rented the stadium for the use of his team. Comerford was aged, easy going. He left his big-league club strictly in Spike Morell's hands; the farms were ruled by Red Bell.

"Pick a good man, the best you can get, and then let him handle things," was the way he put it. And it had paid off. If base-

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ball had been kind to him, he had returned the favor. He paid liberal salaries, treated those who worked for him well and had many friends, even among on-the-diamond foes. But old Mr. Comerford was not one who went out of his way to look into the possibility that others might have designs against him. Counting on this, the combine had gone ahead with their plans. To be sure, they couldn't themselves stand an untenanted stadium, but already they had lined up midget auto races and a rodeo. Comerford would have to pay more rent, much more or get out. That was that.

Bell told the story matter of factly, but Spike caught the edge of tension in the man's voice.

"How do things stand now, Red?"

"Not so good. It figures this way. The city commission and the courts will get into this thing next year, but you know what *that* means in the way of time. I think Mister Comerford's lawyers and most everybody think that they will decide for him and the Lions. Very little question about that. But in the meantime, the Lions, a several million dollar property, will be out of luck and out of a ball park for next season. And that —between us, Spike—will put the old gentleman out of business!"

Morell thought it over. "Gee," he said after a time. "That's a helluva one. A helluva one! 'Course I knew something about the Play Grounds deal but I never thought it could go like this. Wadda we do?"

"Only one thing," Bell came back. "He's got to pay the rent next year—no matter what they jack it up to. And believe me, that's gonna be like hitting a homer swinging with one arm. I know his books, Spike," Bell shook his head. "It's gonna be awful tough. So—here it is—he's got to win this Series! He's got to have a World Series winner to trot out next year. He's got to make those turnstiles click like they've never clicked before! You need a winner all the way for that!"

Morell ruffled a bit at that. "You don't need to fire me. I'm after this Series."

"I know that, Spike. Nobody likes winning as much as you do, except maybe me. But this time it's even more than usual. Get me? This is straight."

The two men sat silently for a moment.

"I'm going to hit the hay," Morell got up. "Glad you told me about this. But I can't say I'll try any harder to win, if you know what I mean—that harder-trying animal ain't been born yet, Red!"

Bell laughed. "Know that, Spike. One more thing. Lemme meddle for the last time —I promise. You've got a damn fine pitcher in that fellow Tom Morell. I know he can help you, Spike. Let him, huh?"

"You stick with your farm clubs, Buster. I'll run it up here!"

Morell left with that, and though he smiled when he said it, he was conscious that Bell's remark about his brother had stirred him up. So a lot of them thought Tom was good? And that he was a little hard on the kid, maybe? Why in hell did Tom have to come up with the Lions, of all the teams in the majors?

WHEN he got back to his hotel there was an envelope sticking under his door. He ripped it open and read the message. It said: "Heard you over the radio and thought you did fine." Spike stiffened. The signature was "Tommy." He balled the paper up angrily in one huge paw and threw a fast strike into the waste basket.

He hadn't done fine. He'd done stinko. He knew and everybody who'd listened knew it. That wiseacre brother! More of his college-learned sarcasm! His way of telling Spike that he'd heard the program and what a fool he'd made of himself on it. He didn't come right out and say so, but this way was even worse. In bed he kept telling himself: "I gotta sleep . . . the fourth game is coming up," but it did absolutely no good. Morell was still sleepless when the first small light of dawn sifted through his shade into the hotel room.

That fourth game was both a spectacular one-man show and a comedy of errors. Spike Morell, with his great hitting and throwing, his flawless work behind the plate, put on the show. His teammates contributed the errors. The Lions got off to a three run first, but the Sox bunted and ran and stole and bunted and cut down the Lion lead to forge ahead themselves in the late innings behind superlative pitching that kept Lion bats at bay. Three times the Greenies tried to take a base on Spike. But the strong-armed catcher's throws winged down there with precision and once, on a great snap throw

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to third he had clearly nipped the front end of a double steal and a promising Sox rally —only to have his third baseman drop the ball as the Play Grounds' crowd howled first with glee and then disappointment. The Sox went on from there to win, but Tracy's fatal miscue was happening all over the field to other men in Lion uniform this day.

Spike hit a triple and two singles to bat in all of the Lion runs, but one man can only do just so much.

The Sox won 7-5 and the odds makers were already quoting Scratchy Dawes' boys as prohibitive favorites to win the Series. After all, the papers pondered, it would only take one more Green Sox triumph to do it.

Spike called a clubhouse meeting after this third defeat. Silence filled the dressing room except for the occasional sound of a player dropping a shoe or glove on the floor.

"I could talk abut how lousy you played. I could spend hours at it," Spike started in a low voice. "The sloppy fielding, the poor throws and the vaunted batting punch—and where the hell was it—but it'd mean keeping you all here until doomsday!"

Spike glared around the room defiantly. He caught his brother's eye and stared him down. He took a deep breath.

"I'm going to tell you one thing. We're going to be a different team out there tomorrow. You and you, and me, all of us, every mother's son of us, we're going to play baseball! If not—well, there'll be some new faces on the roster for next year!" Silence clung to the harsh echo of his words.

"Something else, clucks. You're wearing a uniform that says Lions across the front. Maybe that doesn't mean anything to you—it doesn't mean a damn going by the way you played this afternoon! But it means plenty to a lot of guys! Guys who've played and made history in that uniform; some of them aren't around anymore, but we're wearing it for them." The silence thickened and deepened.

"You call yourselves Lions," Spike sneered. "I'm ashamed for us. For all of us. You and me!" He kicked a catcher's shin guard angrily to the ground and stomped out of the room.

THE newspapers speculated on that "closed" meeting. Reporters saw Spike go in and they saw him come out, and one journalist likened it to the ominous coming and going of a summer thunderstorm.

"Spike Morell's not one to sit with a loser," they wrote. "Expect some fireworks from the Lions, even though they don't have a prayer of coming back against this terrific Greenie club."

The Series, its flag-draped noise and sold-out crowd, peanuts, franks and all the fixings moved into the fifth tilt. And this time the Lions got their bats around on the right pitches and the hit balls went "where they ain't." Five innings along the Morellmen had a tidy 8-1 lead and old Ralph Comerford sitting in the sun of the owner's front row box nodded and looked extremely happy.

In the eighth the diamond actors embarked on the familiar script, though. Lion pitching began to buckle. The plate got smaller and the hurler, coming in with the fat one, would see it winging over his head to rattle off the outfield fences. Five times Spike walked the ball and a dwindling lead out to the pitcher's mound. Three of those times he waved for help from the hastily working bullpen. A triple with two on got the score to 8-6 and a following base on balls quickly finished the present mound incumbent.

Spike, standing there on the hill with waves of sound coming down from the color-bedecked field, the hoots of the partisan Green Sox derisive in his ears, gave his motion to the pen. He slapped the departing pitcher on the back and waited.

A lot came flooding back to him, standing there waiting for the last of five Lion chuckers, the last bullpen occupant. The differences, so many of them, between him and this new man trudging in across the outfield grass.

SPIKE MORELL thought about it standing in the sun and the noise. Home was a long way away, in time and distance; it was "Hick," small-town compared to the sort of cities you visit on the major-league circuit. Those days there was never enough, not enough money or food or anything. Mr. Morell Senior, hadn't been well for a long time. When he died leaving a wife and two boys, well, one boy and one child, for Tom was but six, Spike left the public high school and went to work at the mill. But

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the thing he could do best—baseball—stayed with him. He played on the mill team and then he went to Class D and on up. With his climb in organized baseball, the house at home got fresh paint and new furniture, and Spike's mother, although older, lost some of her worried look. Morell hit the majors and hit them to stay.

Mrs. Morell's last letter to Spike thanked him for the latest check and said that she had a surprise she'd tell him about next time . . . then the next thing the catcher knew he was summoned home. His mother was dead. His brother Tommy was there too. Back hurriedly from the college he'd just been entered in by his proud mother. *That* was the surprise.

But Spike was indignant. No one had been here when she . . . when she. . . . Regret turned into anger. When he'd been Tommy's age, he'd had no fancy college clothes; no college. Calluses instead of good times; aren't good times all you get out of college? He'd heard and read that enough. He, Spike, had not had time for good times, girls, parties, and rah-rah stuff. And now this kid brother had gone off to college on the money he'd earned and sent home to make things easier for his mother.

In his steadily increasing anger he was even rude to little bent Asa Applegate who was his mother's lawyer and friend to the family since days almost beyond remembering. Bitterness mounted in him, but that wouldn't bring his mother back. With the ceremony over, he just wanted to get away. His brother Tom stood tall and slim, saying little. Well, that was all right with Spike. There was nothing to say, anyway.

Spike had taken his leave, then, brushing off Mr. Applegate's thin, kindly fingers tugging at his sleeve. Probably the old geezer wanted to know if the checks would still keep coming . . . the checks to pay for Tom at college. They'd find out. Spike left as soon as he could; the brothers didn't shake hands.

TIME passed in a flurry of base hits, balls and strikes, pennant chases and races. Spike heard that Tom was still in college and he thought, with some satisfaction, that at least it wasn't on money he was sending home. He supposed the kid was—what do they say?—working his way through.

Occasionally the older Morell got a letter in Asa Applegate's wavering old hand telling about things at home or that his brother was doing well at school and congratulating Spike on something the catcher had done in the baseball world. Spike never mentioned Tom in his replies. Not even when Applegate wrote special delivery saying that Tom was "graduating next week and it would be a grand thing if you could come out for the ceremonies. . . . I've looked up your schedule and see you have an open day. . . . Tom hasn't any other family. . . . You'd make an old man and Tom very happy if you'd come, Spike." But Morell never answered, and more time went by.

Finally the Lions took heed of the star operating behind the plate for them. Spike got called into kindly old Mr. Comerford's office one day, got a hearty handclasp and a new job. Manager. The Lions climbed. Around this time Spike heard news of Tom. The boy was playing baseball. That was kinda funny, Spike sniffed. Supposed to be pretty good, the word was. Yeah?

The Lions finished third, finished first, lost in the Series. Then it was this year, now.

Now on the mound waiting for Tom to come in and take his warmups, Spike thought how strange that they both should be together like this. Now, before this crowd. A pitcher and a catcher in the Series, biggest prize of all. Disliking each other, and a pitcher and a catcher are supposed to work together, to understand each other.

Manager Morell stood there wordlessly—what was there to say—and the public address announcement boomed "Now pitching for the Lions, number thirty, Tom Morell." There were mixed noises from the stands as the manager walked from the hill and then the umpire motioned for play to be resumed.

Spike crouched back of the plate and looked out to the mound through the catcher's mask. He called for a fast ball. Tom got the corner. Wasted one. Then got the Greenie on two swings for the third out of the eighth inning.

There was a scattering of applause from Lion rooters as the Morellmen trouped off the field. Several of the Lions mitted Tom for his brief but effective relief stint, but Spike stomped back to the dugout with his

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eyes on the ground, never once looking at the slim hurler who'd closed out the inning.

The Lions did no business in the bottom of the eighth, and Tommy Morell sent the Greenies down one-two-three in the ninth to save the 8-6 Lion win.

In his hotel room later that evening the stocky manager of the Lions was catching up with the papers and thinking over pitching assignments for the next Series game. Coach Doyle had just left the MGR's room after a conference on tomorrow's plans. The papers said it would still be the Greenies, but they all applauded the work of Tommy Morell on the mound.

"You can't accuse the Lion manager of favoritism . . . at least not where his own brother is concerned," one sportswriter blurted. "Just why this twenty-five-year old youngster who, so far, looks like the class of what is otherwise one of the worst pitching staffs in the majors was kept out of things until seven and two-thirds innings of the fifth game is a major mystery."

Spike threw the papers aside irritably. Just then the room phone rang. Spike picked it up. A familiar voice hailed him. It was Asa Applegate.

"Been up here seeing the games," the small town lawyer told him. "Wish you'd come over to my hotel, it's just across town." And he gave an address.

Spike, pleased to hear from the elderly friend, and almost on the verge of accepting the invitation, then recognized the hostelry as one where some of the ballplayers stayed . . . his brother Tommy in particular. So Applegate was up to his old game again! The peacemaker gimmick. And the fiery manager of the Lions was not for it.

"Sorry, I've more work to get done," he replied gruffly.

"But I've got something I want to talk to you about. It's important," the old man urged.

Yeah, important. To you and Tom, thought Spike to himself, frowning down at the phone in his hand. And I'm not buying.

He mumbled something into the phone about how he hoped Applegate would enjoy the games and said an abrupt goodbye.

After hanging up, he felt miserable . . . and angry at himself for so feeling.

"Why in hell do I feel guilty," he chided himself. But the uneasiness continued and plagued him most of the night.

THE sixth game was a slugfest. The Greenies, back on their home field again, responded by hammering four Lion pitchers for a total of eighteen bingles of all varieties and twelve runs. But the Lions were hitting, too. Thirteen hits, including three homers, one by Spike, for fourteen runs.

As base hits sprayed all over the field and the procession of hurlers paraded from both bullpens, a small band of loyal Lion rooters took up the chant from the stands, "We want Morell!" And it was quite clear which Morell they wanted. But Tommy was not even in the bullpen this day, but sitting instead, watching proceedings from the dugout, despite Coach Doyle's suggestion, twice, too, "Why don't you send the kid out to the bullpen, Spike. Look at him. He's miserable sitting here on the bench. They're hitting everyone else." But the second time around Doyle quit. The look on his MGR's face warned him off.

There was something else that happened. It was the home eighth, and big Vicker was tearing in from second on one of the many Green Sox hits. As the Greenie first baseman express-trained into the plate, the throw came in to Spike and the catcher blocked the plate. The collision was violent. Spike Morell's blocky 195-pound body, veteran of many such an entanglement, was bowled over by the six-three, 230-pound glowering Vicker who, as the journalists put it, looked as tough as he was. Spike held the ball and made the tag, but he lost his cap and mitt as he was knocked down by the tremendous weight of the Greenie.

Morell got up all right, put his cap and mitt jauntily back on as though nothing had happened. But the fall had hurt him and Spike was prayerfully glad that he didn't have to do any more throwing down to the bases. Even the little flip necessary to get the ball back to his battery partner caused his arm excruciating pain.

BACK in his hotel room that night Spike got rid of reporters and as soon as he could, sank down on his bed with a groan of relief. His arm was increasingly painful; yet the Lions, who'd just today fought themselves back even in games with the Green

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Sox, needed him desperately in tomorrow's decider.

Instinctively he knew that the one thing he could not do would be to go to a doctor or even the Lions' own trainer. Those things, at Series time, cannot be kept secret. No, somehow he'd have to get over this on his own. His second-string catcher, a .200 hitter with a scatter gun arm, just wouldn't do for the Series, and didn't everybody know it, including the Green Sox. He couldn't let the Lions down. He'd have to play. Manager Morell painfully lifted himself off the bed.

He had it in his mind to draw a hot bath and sit in it, hoping the heat would help his arm, but just then the door buzzer rang. Spike opened up. It was Asa Applegate.

The old lawyer came in and gently shook the pilot's hand. Spike winced.

Applegate stood back quickly and surveyed the other man. "Sooo! Tommy was right," he said quietly.

"Whaddya mean, 'Tommy was right'?" the manager flared up.

Applegate shook his head. "Too bad you don't know as much about your kid brother as he does about you. After the game today, Tom told me he thought your arm had been hurt in that collision with big Vicker. Said he could tell the way you handled yourself behind the plate. He's been worrying about it ever since. He knew you'd keep it quiet, too."

Then the old lawyer pushed Spike gently into a chair. "Now you're going to listen to me, Spike Morell, whether you want to or not."

The manager made a face but sat, too weary and in too much pain to resist.

Asa Applegate began to talk, and as he went on, Morell began to forget the pain in his arm and shoulder as a different kind of feeling came over him.

For emphasis, at the end, Applegate checked off on his worn fingers. His old voice cracked like a whip . . . and somehow Spike listened all the way through without interrupting.

"Going to college was the fulfillment of a promise Tommy made to your mother, Spike. He could do nothing else, for her sake. Believe me, I know. And don't think the youngster liked the idea. See, just like you he loved baseball. He wanted to play ball more than anything and he had his hero. That hero was you, Spike. Whenever he could, the kid came up to the city to see you play. He'd sit in the stands . . . you never knew he was here, but I did. I often came up with him.

"Something else you ought to know, Spike. Tom had saved up every penny you sent for his college expenses at the beginning. It's in a bank back home . . . in your name."

THE fiery manager of the Lions must have shown his emotions then, for the elderly man reached over and put a reassuring hand on his knee. Morell blinked, and looked away; damn, that frog was back in his throat, but this time it hadn't taken a microphone to do it.

"Guess this is kind of a shock and an awakening for you," Asa said kindly. "And don't think Tommy hasn't seen your side. . . . I must confess, sometimes I haven't. But I know you've come up the hard way, Spike. Nothing was done for you. You had to do it all yourself . . . and you did. And *of course* it seemed like a raw deal to find out suddenly that money you were sending home to make things easier for your mother was going into Tom's college." His voice lowered.

"It's been hard on all three of us, son. You and Tommy, not knowing, not quite understanding each other, and I, sort of in between. Your father's closest friend and wanting to see you and Tommy together again and waiting all these years for it."

Applegate stopped talking and seemed to be listening. It was the door again. This time the lawyer, motioning Spike to stay where he was, hopped up spryly. It was Tom, coming into the room almost apologetically. He had some packages. He looked at his older brother.

"How's the arm, Spike?"

"Say, what is this?" the leader ruffled, embers of what once had been antagonism still in his eyes. "What're you guys staging?"

Applegate did the soothing. "Spike, I'm going to say right now that this little talk was all my idea." On the other side of the room Tom was busying himself with the parcels.

"And now, Mister Manager, we're going to give you a real going over." Old Asa rubbed his hands together. "Maybe you boys

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didn't know it, but more years ago than I'm going to confess, I used to hang around a country ball club. And by jinks I still know how to take care of arms. That, fella me lad, is what Tommy and I are going to do with you!"

Spike leaned forward. Those packages in Tom's arms had been undressed of their paper wrappings now. Spike took a long look . . . rubbing alcohol, liniment. . . .

Then he sank back in his chair, a half smile on his face "All right, fellas. Go to it. But Tommy, take it kinda easy with that right arm. You're pitching for me tomorrow."

Applegate pretended that he was too busy with the medications to notice, but out of the corner of his eye, he saw the two men shake hands . . . it just seemed to happen . . . no words, the way men do.

Asa tried not to sound pleased as punch, cleared his throat instead. "No more wasting time! We've got to work on that arm!" And they did.

ONLY Spike out there on the sun-drenched infield of Green Sox Field knew what a job those two liniment slingers had done on him the previous night. For the hurt was much more than he'd dared to admit . . . even perhaps to himself. Sure, his flipper was still weak, painful, and the routine flip down to second, before the inning started, caused him to grimace so with pain that he bent over suddenly to fuss with his shin guards to cover up. But he'd be in there.

Spike kept hoping for the big inning, and for Lion bats to start their old familiar boom-boom. But the Sox pitcher, Forbes, was sharp. Men trailed up and trailed back from the plate. Spike got a single in the third, Tracy beat out a dribbler in the fifth, but that was all.

And crouched back of the plate, the doughty leader kept pitching with Tom, praying the kid wouldn't allow much traffic on the bases. Sox base runners meant they'd start stealing on him. Then they'd find out about his arm. In the home fifth a Greenie combed out a double. The feared Vicker was next up with one out.

The kid pitched and the ball slid off the outside. Vicker fouled one back, then took two wide for a 3 balls 1 strike count. Spike called time, walked out towards the mound.

"You all right, Tommy?"

His hurler nodded to the manager. "I'll put 'em in there now, Spike. I don't want to load up those sacks in front of you."

"Hell with that! Don't give this big boy a good one."

Tom nodded and the stock catcher left the hill.

Vicker fouled an outside pitch away, then Tommy pitched high to the cap peak. On the pitcher's motion the Green Soxer on second made his move for third. Spike got the high pitch, set his feet, cocked his arm . . . and a stabbing spasm of pain froze it there. Morell held onto the ball fearful of throwing it away, dropping his arm finally to his side in a futile gesture and, instinctively, rubbing at the terrible pain with his other hand. The Soxer was on third as Vicker trotted toward first, sneering over his shoulder at Spike, "Arm falling off, Pop?"

Sharper eyes than Vicker's had evaluated the scene, though. Out from the Greenie dugout popped Scratchy Dawes, never one to miss a trick, calling time and running down to third to talk to his baserunner there. When Dawes came back, he flashed his Cheshire grin at Morell. "Got you!" he yelped triumphantly.

A TIGHT-LIPPED, determined Tommy got the second out swinging. But with the next Soxer up, the Greenies went. A delayed steal, well executed, is pretty to watch. Vicker left first with the pitch as the Green runner on third came down the line . . . waiting. He had to break this up, Spike knew. He set his teeth and threw, as hard as he could out toward second where Vicker was converging like an elephant.

The minute he'd let fly, Spike knew with the sure instinct of the veteran catcher the throw was pitifully weak, that Vicker would be safe and the Greenie roaring in now from third, as the second part of the delayed steal unveiled, would score too.

But he'd counted without Tommy. The pitcher is supposed to get himself out of the way on that flip to second. Not this pitcher. Tommy went up with his body, with his glove, came down with the ball and fired it back to Spike. The catcher took the ball, blocked the plate and made the putout by

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five feet. The outnumbered Lion rooters in the stands went wild.

Tom and Spike came back to the dugout side by side. The manager got up a smile through the pain that surged in increasing waves from his arm. "Nice cutoff Tommy. I'd lost him at second. That's using the old head!" It was praise from Caesar and the young hurler's face lit up.

But Spike sat in the dugout with the doomed feeling that the Sox knew his arm was dead, no question about it. The game for him became an endurance contest, the crowd sounds faded away beyond the ever-higher wall of pain that beat at him from his shoulder. And if Tommy pitched great ball, so did Forbes. Then in the bottom of the seventh, Vicker got a fat pitch from Tom, afraid to hit for the corners, and missing, to put men on. The ball landed upstairs in the right field stands.

It stood 1-0 just long enough for the visitors' eighth to get rolling. A pass, a balk, a single, an infield out and a long double by Spike added up to two runs. Tommy struck out the side in the home eighth. Spike, even more agony in his arm from his successful batting stint, hardly remembered the Lion ninth, except for thinking it was good they went out before he'd have to tote the lumber up to the plate and swing again. Then he thought, "My God, we're only leading by one run!"

HE HEARD words, words of encouragement, ralized they were from his battery mate as the two walked out for the home ninth. Tommy was looking at him worriedly too, and Spike, out of the corner of his eye saw Coach Doyle dispatch the Lion second string catcher to the bullpen to warm up. That made him smile. No, it would be this way, he was here to play out the string, good or bad.

Tommy was throwing fast balls now; not as much breaking stuff, for it hurt even for Spike to move his body and go out after the kid's wide sweeping curve and Tom knew it. One green-uniformed batter swung twice, then popped high in front of the plate. Spike swayed under the ball but yelled Tracy away and made the out himself.

Next Vicker.

"You're falling apart, Pop," the big fellow sneered as he stepped in.

The Greenie first sacker watched Tommy's change of pace come in for a called strike. Then he unbuttoned on the next one. The ball sailed out in a line and the screams of the partisan crowd grew. The sphere just missed going all the way, but bounced off the right field concrete, and fast fielding held Vicker on second. The second out was a bouncing smash deep to short, Vicker moving to third.

Spike called time and went out to the mound. They were getting on to Tommy's fast one; the kid had been shaking off the curve signs.

"Curve 'em, Kid," the manager said.

Tommy shook his head. "It'll be tough for you, Spike. I can fog it past this last man."

Dawes was hurriedly sending up a pinch hitter.

Spike looked and shook his head. "This guy coming up is a fast ball lover. We gotta curve him . . . when I flash those signals, Tommy, you give me what I call for. I'm manager of this ball club," and he punched playfully at his hurler. The action was supposed to say I'm okay, still got some innings left in me, but he was conscious that Tommy saw through the act.

MANAGER Morell called for three curves in a row; it was agony keeping up on the toes, moving out after the big ones. But the Greenie pinch hitter swung lustily twice. On the two and one pitch it happened. Spike gave the sign. It was another wide breaking curve, this one outside. It came in big, huge as a balloon and slid, slid away, ticked the catcher's outstretched mitt and rolled to the backstop, Spike scrabbling after it. He got the ball off balance and fell heavily on his bad shoulder. It was a split second episode, but he saw and heard and thought plenty.

The Green Soxer, huge Vicker lumbering in from third with what would be the tying run . . . Scratchy Dawes grinning like an ape on the Sox dugout stairs . . . Spike lay there an eternity and felt the ball in his hand and the dreadful pain up in his arm. Morell knew something, too. Knew that this was the ball game, right here. He couldn't go another inning—oh, he'd try but it wouldn't work.

When Vicker crossed the plate from third,

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that would be as good as winning the jackpot . . .

Then he saw Tommy covering the plate and waving his arms. . . . Spike threw and the ball seemed to take an eternity . . . slowly, so slowly. Then the reel speeded up. Tom took the throw, spun and leaped at the viciously charging Vicker. He came down on top of the Sox first sacker, rode the man's great bulk across the plate, rubbing the ball all over him, and the umpire in midnight blue jabbed his thumb skyward and screamed, "You're out!"

Spike was up then before Tommy, stunned for a moment from the impact of the putout play, and the two, helping each other, walked arm in arm to the field house with their teammates between the cordon of police that struggled to keep back the frenzied crowd. Somewhere from a front row box Owner Comerford and Asa Applegate were waving but individual faces were lost in that sea of humanity.

To Spike, it seemed suddenly that he and Tommy were alone, walking on grass. Not the grass of a baseball field, but like at home. Like when they used to go fishing or take walks together so long ago. But *was* it long ago. Or was he still fifteen and little Tommy only five? It didn't matter; there was a lot of understanding between the two and there always would be . . . hell, what's ten years and a college education between pals!

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o

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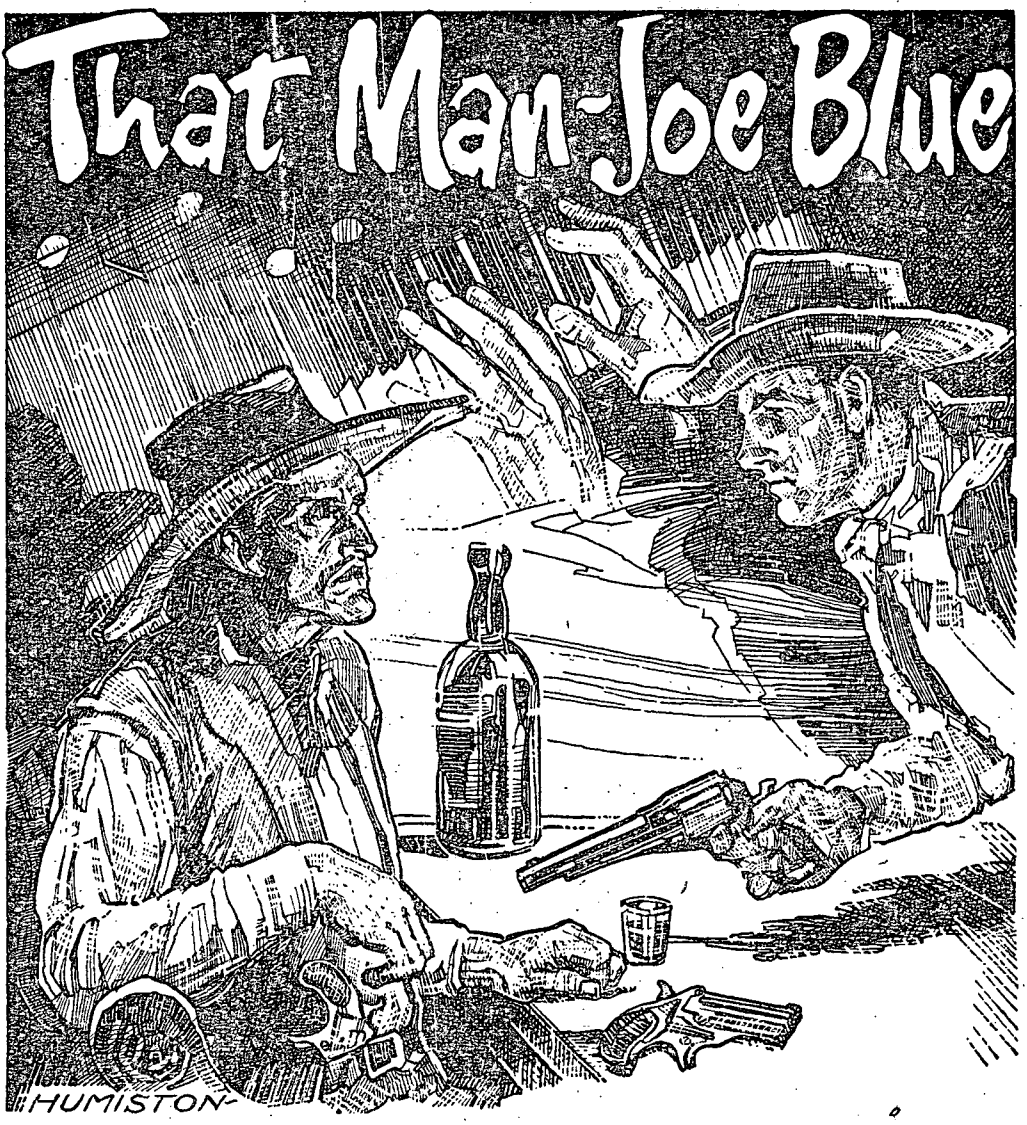
That Man-Joe Blue



By WILLIAM CORCORAN

THE way I was feeling at the outset of that early spring night before the trouble, free and footloose as a yearling colt, fresh in town after long winter months up on the snow range—well, now Ironbound, Colorado just wasn't big enough to contain me. Still it was game to try. The patent oil lamps already beckoned joyful welcome through the twilight haze on Main Street, the prized and costly Steinway piano in Paddy Gorman's Gold Trace Saloon tinkled a teasing tune I couldn't place—*Dinah Had a Wooden Leg*, maybe, or else *Hell Among the Yearlin's*. The cooling air was savory with remembered things: a touch of coal smoke and tang of cooking, fresh lumber

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and saddlery and expensive cigars, even a wisp of reminder, invisible and everywhere, of the sweetness and spice of lovely laughing girls.

Oh, it looked good to a cowboy! I was twenty and sinfully healthy and jubilant, tough-minded and innocent—and dangerous as sweated dynamite, all unknowing, never suspecting how treacherous such innocence can be.

I was waiting for Joe Blue. Joe was my friend, and we'd planned for this day of jubilee weeks back on a lonely midnight when a late blizzard moaned over the line cabin and he made music with his harmonica and we talked by the red-hot little stove. We met like that once in a while where his outfit's wire cornered the spread I rode for.

Now this evening Joe was late showing in town, so I just killed time, after supper at Chong Lee's, setting up combination shots for myself on one of the pool tables at the Elite. I played too seldom for a sharpshooter, but I had a knack, and the practice was pleasure enough. The music and the dancing and the laughing girls—ah, they'd keep. I thought a lot of Joe Blue. I had a surprise for him, and that came first.

And out of that peaceable and innocent beginning the trouble took seed and thrived beyond all nature.

It began with Pickett Coles. Unexpectedly I found I had an audience: Pickett himself, elegant, full of himself, smiling and sarcastic, and trailing him, a few grinning hangers-on. Coles was no friend, but he was important. My first thought was to ask politely had he seen Joe Blue, for Pickett was the son of that stern old ramrod, Major Malcolm Coles, Joe's unreconstructed boss and biggest cattleman in Frying Pan Valley. Only son and heir—there was a younger daughter that didn't count—which gives a leading hint of his place, his bent and his standing.

I thought maybe Pickett and Joe had rode into town together and Joe was elsewhere right now, looking for me. The smile stopped me from asking. Something was wrong with it, even sinister, and it reached out and touched me, light as feathers, and I was chilled. Puzzled, but definitely warned. You can't pin down a thing like that in words. I said, "Hi, Coles," and went on studying a side pocket.

"Don't let me interrupt," said Pickett. He talked like an actor, stuck on himself and laying it on thick. "This is the hired hands' night to howl, and I admire to watch the paisanos at their merry play."

Someone guffawed, and I clean missed a sure combo shot. I felt scared. Not honest fear, but the scared feeling you get from the suspicion that someone you've long known and taken for granted has suddenly and without warning gone crazy. I couldn't say I knew Pickett well—he was older, rich, reckless with a streak of cruelty, apt to be too handy with a gun, too fast company for a kid. He'd never paid me no mind; now he spoke to sting and provoke. Provoke what?—

"Billiards was invented for gentlemen," Coles went on. "Did you ever hear how the plebeian game of pool originated? The peasantry wanted to ape the gentry, and billiards was beyond their skill or comprehension. So they corrupted it with the childish pastime that remained well within their grasp—they transformed it, by God, into an oversize game of marbles!"

He lied by the book, and I was suddenly hot to tell him so, but he got the laugh he was looking for, and I kept shut. I had to think hard. Pickett wasn't fishing for laughs alone; he was out for mischief and bound he'd get it. I couldn't think why. He knew I was Joe's friend, and Joe, a couple of years older than me, was a top hand in the Coles outfit, cheerful, a hard worker and well liked. Could Joe be in trouble? I couldn't believe it.

THEN I had to go on and think of certain other things, and I was dead up against it. The wearing of guns in town had been prohibited a couple of years before, and Marshal Weed was taking no nonsense. Not from the likes of me, in any case. My gun was in the room I'd taken upstairs over the Blue Front. That suited me fine; I wasn't feuding with anybody.

But what about Pickett? I'd heard tell of his derringers, single-shot .44's, hand-forged and engraved by Kerr of London. They were small, discreet and deadly, without a doubt, and it was Pickett's boast that no two-bit

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flag-stop cowtown ordinances applied to him. Could be he was right. There was no record that the marshal had ever questioned him, let alone search him.

Not that Weed was careless or scared. There was much more to it. There were tales of how that old Roman, Pickett's dad, had thrashed Pickett within an inch of his life more than once for wildness and defiance of authority, catching him mistreating the stock, trying to bully the hands, maybe worse we don't know about, but that was years gone, and he'd suffered no checkrein since. He was a Coles—more exactly, "of the Alabama Coles," whatever that meant—and he calmly looked on the fact as a license. Certainly the iron-jawed Major and his erratic son and the shy, strictly sheltered girl Melly Coles were the closest thing to landed aristocracy that country ever saw or was likely to tolerate. They got away with it because they were rich and highhanded and because that was an easygoing time and place.

Someone beyond Pickett made a sly remark I didn't catch, and he laughed. "If you let the runts get out of hand and ramrod the herd, the consequences are on your own head. There's no actual need. The scrub knows he's a scrub always. Just let him know you know it. He'll do the rest."

"You sure about that, Pickett?"

"Sure as a Kentucky studbook, and that's the surest thing a man'll ever know. The blood lines tell."

It was a mile over my head. I'm sure it was a mile over the heads of the riffraff trailing Pickett for whatever was in it. But somehow, someway it personally applied. There was no use trying to figure it out, no sense talking.

Better stop it quick. Give this lad an inch, he'd tromp all over you. Already I was marked and branded; I was the goat for all to see. In a backhanded way, so was Joe Blue; of that I was certain. And that got me. Joe in trouble with this trumpeting tinhorn, this sure-thing badman? Well, I was scared of those derringers, and at the same moment scalded by a wave of anger, maybe justifiable hatred for Pickett Coles. In fact, for a moment I kind of lost my head.

I turned to look at him directly, grounding my cue. "Is there something about my style of pool that doesn't suit you, Mister Coles?"

His dark eyes glittered; he'd been drinking, I reckoned.

"Something, Stover?" He laughed. "Hell, it's everything!"

I nodded, showing no surprise, then walked to one side and racked the cue. He watched me, sly, supercilious, puzzled. I walked back again.

"I don't get it," I said. "I don't get it at all. But we can skip the preliminaries." Then I hit him with everything I could put into a quick, offhand right to the jaw that caught him still grinning.

Well, it wasn't a haymaker, which properly should start from the feet, travel fast, and land with the weight of the body behind it. This created trouble, rather than finished it. I meant it that way. I was too mad and scared for half measures. I could have killed him just to put an end to that crazy, cold panic. It was up to him.

Pickett crashed into the bunch behind him, half dazed and bleeding at the lip, and half a dozen hands propped him up. He didn't try to come back at me—the hands still gripped him, for one thing. He dabbed a handkerchief to his face, glanced at it, and then kind of pulled his loose features together.

"Johnny Stover, it'll be full dark in about forty-five minutes." This was no actor talking; this was quiet and real and for keeps. "You've got exactly that long. To live, maybe. Understand? If I meet you here in town thereafter I'm going to shoot you on sight."

I didn't stop to think. "The next time I hit you, Pickett, and that'll be anytime you say, I'll see that it breaks the jaw. You talk too much."

He nodded. "Full dark, kid. I'll come looking for you." To his pals he said icily, "Take your hands off me."

They obeyed, not too hastily. What he did was his business, but they had nothing to gain, they didn't want to be mixed up in a bald murder. I was unarmed. There was no further doubt in my mind about those derringers.

That ended the incident. Pickett walked out, the others huddling after. Skinny Dink Evans, who ran the Elite, came hurrying over.

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"Good grief, Johnny Stover, what did you do that for?"

"I dunno. Go ask him. He wanted it, so I obliged."

"But you know he's armed. His pa is king-man in this county. The sheriff's in his pocket. Boy, you'll have to clear out."

He was sweating. I knew he was concerned about me, but he was even more concerned about a near-shooting on his premises. I was too upset myself to sympathize. I cursed and shouldered him aside and headed for the door.

I walked all the way to Miller's livery corrals on the edge of town. I sat on the top rail for a while and smoked a cigarette and talked to the animals. Then I walked back into town. I didn't stop to speak to anybody, and nobody tried to speak to me. What in hell to do next, where best to go—no experience helped me now.

By that time the salmon-and-violet afterlight lay in streaks of cool fire just above the smoky blue of the ranges. Believe me, I was watching. Along Main Street the muted tremolo of the piano at Paddy Gorman's keened like a lorn, lost creature, grieving of home and the beloved one. It did me no good.

I finally decided, regardless, to step into Gorman's. I had to find out about Joe Blue, and Paddy's Steinway always pulled him like a magnet. Joe was the only rider I ever knew who could do more than fumble at the keys. In fact, Joe could play almost anything. It was one of those things you couldn't believe in till you saw and heard him. Joe on a horse, Joe with a rope, big and homely and good humored, was a master of his trade, but Joe on a piano stool or balancing a borrowed banjo on his knee—he was an angel. He had a joyful gift, a talent, a power, and God alone, who bestowed it, knows where or how it found nourishment and thrived, because all the studying and learning he'd ever done was to watch and listen to others and get the hang of it, whatever it might be, taking his time and saying nothing, and presently, unexpectedly, move you heart and soul with the sudden magic in his hands.

I know I wasn't exactly sensible about Joe and his music, but a dumb kid that never could carry a tune wasn't likely to judge such a gift calmly. I did what I could though, such as sending two bits in answer to an ad I found in the Denver *Post* for a book called *Simonetti's Piano Self-Taught.* It wouldn't teach me anything, and it couldn't begin to teach Joe to make music, but I figured it might give him his first explanation of how and why and what-for. He laughed when I gave it to him, but he kept it and took it home with him. I'm a great believer in books, and I guess just about that time he was beginning to take me and them seriously.

And that maybe answers the question that might occur to anybody. About friendship. I got a great deal out of Joe's music. What was there in it for him? I was younger, lacked his experience, didn't draw the kind of money he earned. I think it was books more than anything. That, and my gift of gab and his knack for listening, remembering and thinking things through.

I know it's hard to believe. The books were my father's. He died, along with my mother, in an epidemic of typhoid that wiped out a settlement in western Kansas while I was a toddler. I was rescued and kept by neighbors. Hail and grasshoppers did for them finally, and they went back East. I was growing up then and hated what happened to them, but I wanted to stay. They left me all that remained of my folks' belongings, a box of big thick books.

THAT box saw some strange adventures, but it was all I had to remember them by, and I hung on to it, leaving it in safe hands, until I tied up with the outfit I now worked for. That was three years ago, and they kept me on steady, so at last I sent for the box of books. I guess I was curious and reaching a time in life—I wanted to see what my father had read, find out what was in the books he had set such store by.

I hadn't looked into the box in years, so it was a bit of a shock. First I thought of burning them for junk. Then it occurred to me: what would the old man think of a son too dumb and ignorant even to talk about all the things in those books? They were full of his own handwriting, remarks and corrections and arguments, so it was plain he wanted to talk. If I started reading, so I could understand, it would be like lis-

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tening to his voice. It was the only way I'd ever have of making his acquaintance.

THAT'S what got me started. It worked too. I sweated, and time and again I was hopelessly out of my depth. I read them the best I could, and some of them again, and a few over and over. I picked the unlikeliest of the lot to start on, just out of contrariness, I expect, but I never dared breathe the title to a living soul—except Joe, which I'm coming to. The bunch I lived with never questioned the queerness of a cowhand buried in a book because I explained and showed them some of my father's handwriting and that was something they could respect. But the one I started on, and how it got there I'll never know, was Bowditch's *Practical Navigator.*

This is neither the time nor place to go into the question of what a cowhand could possibly get out of a guide to the world's oceans. Apart from my father, what I found was stories. Adventure and danger and hair-raising escape—the *Navigator* is rich with them. The stars and horizons, the diagrams and tables in the back—well, the less said the better. I got a look at the world and some of the amazing things in it, and that's all I need say about Bowditch.

And that's exactly what Joe got. He was the only one I talked to. We didn't run into each other every day, which may be just why I talked freely. Man, I talked high, wide and handsome as a cow loose in the corn. He listened, and later asked questions, and I soon found he never forgot a thing once he heard it and understood it. He'd hark back to earlier talk, perhaps, and argue a point, or jump ahead and explain something I didn't get, because he'd worked it out from the evidence.

At first it was just tolerant curiosity, I guess, but soon he was dead serious about it, like a man studying for an attorney or a veterinary or a mine inspector. I don't think he had any set intentions even then; I took it to be just natural in a man never cut out to be a lifelong hired hand. The intentions came later.

All this made for a special and close friendship. It interfered neither with music or dancing or good times, which had their place, but never yet filled a man's life. Besides Bowditch, there was for example Gibbon's *Decline and Fall,* Darwin's *Voyage of the Beagle* and Creasy's *Decisive Battles*—that's enough to give an idea. I offered to lend them, but Joe quickly said no, some day he'd buy them all, but he was too busy now. I could tell what I remembered, and he'd listen and say what he thought.

So we were friends, but we had each something extra and exceptional to give in friendship. They say you get out of life what you put into it. I guess that suited us fine. This afternoon it wasn't battles or ships or the stars in their courses weighing on my mind. This time it was a handsome Mexican guitar I'd brought along.

I knew it was a fine instrument because I'd listened to it many a time in the hands of young Manuel Perez, a real smart hand and companero, before he got a letter telling of the death of his father and calling him home to Old Mexico. Manuel, before setting out on his long, hasty journey, sold his saddle and gear, and was reconciled to parting with his fine guitar only when I told him who I was buying it for. He knew Joe Blue. So that was to be my surprise, and if anybody thought it was foolish or extravagant, he was crazy, for who from now on was going to reap more benefit from that guitar than me?

But now in the twilight hour, there was me and my guitar, and somewhere in town was Pickett Coles, nursing his jaw and his poisonous grudge—and where was Joe Blue? I began to dread the answer.

It was quiet in the Gold Trace; the piano player had quit to eat supper. Paddy Gorman, at the angle of the bar, told me, no, he hadn't seen Joe. Paddy had a square, honest red face about as readable as a brick wall. He stared at me for a moment without making a move for glass or bottle. Then he grunted in surprise. "No, by Jinx, he ain't drunk!" Then he came up with a decanter of private stock, pouring one for each of us, and solemnly proceeded to drink my health.

"Now tell us about it," he said confidentially.

Well, what was there to tell? He'd already heard all that I knew. He nodded with a matter-of-factness that I was far from sharing.

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"Do you want my advice, Johnny? I ain't forcing it on you."

"And I ain't asking. What I want is information. Where is Joe Blue, and what the hell's the matter with Coles?"

Paddy gave an enormous shrug. I knew what he meant. He wasn't talking, wouldn't take the responsibility.

I cursed, with a kind of gone, helpless feeling. This was the face the whole town would wear. Taking no sides, cautious and calculating. Nobody'd actually side with Coles. But they'd leave me standing strictly alone.

"All right, you scribe and Pharisee, you win," I said sarcastically. "What's this now reluctant advice?"

"Go home," he said promptly. "Let this blow over. You didn't start it—why take it on yourself to finish it? What's the odds? Everybody knows Pickett Coles. He's been drinking, crowding his capacity. He's been throwing his money around like peanuts in a monkey cage, and itching for trouble like the king-monkey of the lot."

"He found it tonight."

"Lay off, Johnny. Nobody'll misesteem you. They'll just be set to admire your good sense.

"The guys in the bunkhouse, for instance?" I was a little hot under the collar. "They're readying for round-up now. I'll be with them, and running into every rider and acquaintance from the Spanish Peaks to the San Juans. Won't I cut a hell of a fine figure though?"

His jaw squared and he was mad too. "Come off the high horse," he barked. "Who the hell do you think you are? You're nothing but a small-punk, hot-headed kid wrangler, and don't you forget it. What difference does it make to anybody what kind of figure you cut?"

I just looked at him without saying anything. I licked my lips, but I couldn't talk.

He flushed." Sorry, kid. You made your bet, so I called you. I don't blame you for slugging Coles. But you're getting into deeper waters than you know. Don't be a sucker."

"It don't matter about me, Paddy." I felt humble and a little sick. "It's Joe Blue."

"What about Joe? When did you see him last?"

"It's about a month now. He'd have sent word if he couldn't make it today."

"Maybe." The gray eyes were veiled and remote. "Hes a grown man, he can take care of himself. Did he mention any trouble?"

"None whatever. I never saw a man happier. He was primed with schemes and projects, like he had life by the tail and it snubbed to a post."

"As how?" said Paddy in a peculiar tone. "He find a gold mine?"

"Gold, my shirt-tail! He had a claim picked out on Box Elder Creek. He had exact plans—cabin and lean-to, corrals, some head of stock, a mountain of work. I don't know the half. He said he might have great news about now, I must keep it under my hat. I didn't speak of it then, but I thought a lot since—I got some pay saved up, maybe I could throw it with him."

Paddy's jaw sagged. "You?" he said in disbelief.

"Sure, why not?"

HE SHOOK his head and began swearing to himself. There was nothing comical about it. I could see he was profoundly anxious and up against it, but I couldn't see why. I couldn't see anything astonishing about my throwing in with Joe Blue.

"Look, kid," he said. "If you want to do Joe a favor, you hightail for home. Suppose he came riding up this minute? He'd find you feuding with his boss's son. The Major is a squareshooting old turkey-cock, but a little off-center about the family name and honor and stuff. Cut off thy right hand if it offends? He'd do it like a shot. What about Joe? What would you have him do now?"

I hadn't thought of that. Before I could frame an answer Paddy went on, "Beat it, Johnny. Don't try to figure Pickett Coles, he'll get his comeuppance. I'll talk to Joe Blue. He'll know—and he'll thank you."

"I guess you're right," I allowed grudgingly.

"Of course I am." Paddy refilled the glasses, hearty and forcing it a bit. "Here's to youth, Johnny. Enjoy it while you may. Ah, lad, the blindness and pity and the wonder of it!"

It was just so much more fancy language,

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but I drank his toast. I felt empty of argument. In fact, I felt just about persuaded. But that was before I ran into Marshal Weed and got busted wide open all over again.

The marshal stopped me on the street, stepping out of a doorway. There was still daylight in the west. I had looked into a couple of places where there might be some scrap of news or an enlightening word about Pickett. All I got was a leery eye and a guarded greeting. The town wasn't hostile; it just wanted no part of my trouble, and wished, like Paddy Gorman, I'd get the hell out of Ironbound before my time ran too thin.

"Hold on a minute, Stover," Weed commanded. "Want a word with you."

His lean, blue-jawed face was blank as a dead fish. I knew that expression. Thurman Weed was a good law officer, I guess; I didn't envy him the job. He could club a man with his pistol barrel or shoot him—he'd done both in Ironbound — without breaking the rhythm of his tobacco-chewing jaws. Once I'd watched while he shot a harmless stray dog tied to a fence; the dog read his purpose and growled, begging. Weed only did his duty, but his calm absent air of remoteness from any kind of feeling whatever put a chill through you. It told you what to expect from this man. I stopped and waited, cold all over.

"Where do you think you're going?" The tone was jocular.

"Nowhere that would interest you, Weed. I'm looking for a friend."

"Yeah, that's what I thought," he said, like a man humoring a liar. "Of course, you know you ain't going to find him?"

"I'm looking for Joe Blue," I said carefully. "He said he'd be here. So far nobody's seen him, heard from him, or will allow in so many words they even know him."

"Ain't it occurred to you to guess why?" He chuckled, totally without humor. "He ain't coming. He's been shot."

Well, I guess I should have cursed or choked or something. I just stood there blank. It was like I knew it, knew it all along. Joe wasn't killed. No need to ask; I could tell. Maybe he wasn't even badly hurt. But from some points of view that was even worse. The fight wasn't finished.

"You mean Pickett Coles?" I said. "Pickett shot Joe?"

"That's right. There was a quarrel. Out at the ranch. Both men were armed. There were witnesses. The sheriff is taking no action."

"You mean it was Joe's fault?"

"Provocation, assault, I don't know what. Self-defense covers Pickett Coles."

"I don't believe that."

Weed smiled. "Nobody's asking your opinion, kid. Tell me. Did you know anything about this when you hit Pickett?"

I shook my head.

He went on, watching me. "Did you ever hear Joe Blue say anything about Miss Coles?"

"Melly Coles? That kid? Certainly not—well, hell, except what any man might say."

"What's that?"

"Why, what a fine, sweet-natured girl she is, and right pretty, and with a quiet, proud way of her own so different from her menfolk. Some day she'll be a winner, grown up and all. Why, Joe thought the world and all—" I stopped. "Look here, Weed, what are you driving at?"

"Nothing, son. Not a thing."

"Are you insinuating Joe Blue talked out of turn about Melly Coles? That's a damned lie!"

HE DIDN'T get mad. "I wasn't there, so I wouldn't know. Whatever was said ain't being repeated. It ain't healthy—concerning Miss Melly."

"Well, by Creation, it ain't healthy to repeat lies about Joe Blue either!"

"Forget it, kid." The tone was flinty, and he suddenly switched the subject. "You toting any weapons?"

"I am not."

His eyebrows made skeptical arches, and I could read his indecision. If he'd put his hands on me ever so lightly, touched even my coat lapel, I don't know what I might have done.

"Johnny Stover, you're a fool kid, but you got a lot to learn about people, your own self included. I failed to appreciate what was cooking today, or I'd have turned you right around the minute you poked your nose in town. Not for anything you ever did. Just for nothing. I could have saved

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you the need of messing around with Pickett Coles."

"It was Pickett started messing around. If I'd known—"

"Yes?" he prompted. "Go on."

"Never mind. Nothing. Where's Joe Blue now?" How bad is he hurt?"

"In a minute," he told me coolly. "I'll finish what I have to say. I want you to get your horse and get out of town. I'm not interested in your feelings, your rights or wrongs, I'm here to keep the peace. Understand me? I aim to keep the peace."

NO EXPLANATION needed, the tone was enough. He knew about the deadline. He was determined to halt a killing. I didn't count. He was warning me out of the way to save Pickett the commission of murder. If put to it, he'd even shoot me himself. He was coldblooded, he had nothing against me—he was simply in Major Coles' pocket along with the sheriff and half the county.

"I get you," I told him. I didn't want to talk any more.

"It's getting late," he suggested.

"All right, all right. What about Joe Blue?"

"Joe's still kicking. Only one bullet hit him. He's laid up at the ranch, for the time being anyway. Ain't talked yet, that I heard, and probably won't. But he'll make out. Doc Sankey did a good job, I reckon."

I was suspicious. "How good?"

"He saved the arm. First he was going to amputate. The wrist may never be right, I understand, but that's better than no arm at all."

"The wrist?" It took a second to sink in. "You mean he'll be a cripple—Joe Blue?"

Weed glanced at me. I never thought to see compassion in his face, and maybe it was only a kind of impersonal regret, recollecting Paddy Gorman's piano, the song of a banjo in the night.

"Tough, ain't it?" He smiled thinly. "Don't make it worse, son."

I turned abruptly and walked away. I walked fast, hard, pounding my heels on the planks.

Well, I went directly to my room at the Blue Front. I was good as knocked on the head. I had no more inquiries, no business in town at all. I wasn't running away, I just wanted to hole up, to get away from people and think this out.

I just couldn't think it out. Joe Blue talking out of turn about an innocent young girl, about any female? It was impossible. The town crediting such a story? What had got into them? They knew Joe. He'd been around; he knew women; he had little truck with them, but he dealt with the worst of their kind in charity and good humor.

No, it was something else responsible. It had to be. That foul story—Pickett had cooked that up to cover something worse. It gave him ironclad vindication, at least in our country. And nobody dared call a Coles a liar.

Nobody? I sat on the edge of the iron bed and smoked a cigarette and wondered.

Well, not Paddy Gorman, for one, and Paddy was no man's creature. It wasn't surprising he'd held out on me. Even Paddy, regardless of what he knew, was stumped. That Joe Blue? Paddy couldn't possibly explain, so he kept shut, and tried his damnedest to get me out of town before too late.

Well, why didn't I git?

From under the bed I picked up Manuel's guitar and pulled off the canvas cover. I tried to find a chord, but it wasn't in tune, and I didn't know how to tune it. I just sat there looking at that lovely instrument that guys like me, and cripples, would never be able to play.

Then I glanced through the window and watched the last trace of old rose fading, fading to darkness in the west.

I cursed and jumped up. I dug into my things and got out the old Navy colt. I'd never fired it in anger, but I knew it like the inside of my hat. The chambers were loaded. I stuck it down my waistband under my belt and buttoned the coat over it. I went out of there, and the windows throughout the flimsy building rattled with the slamming of the door.

I was shaking all over as I headed up the street. It might have been the chill of evening, or something fishy I ate at Chong Lee's—but I wasn't fooling myself. It was those derringers. It was that blued-steel .45 that Weed carried. I'd seen a small sample of what it could do.

A couple of the boys were loafing in the

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doorway of the Elite. I thought of crossing the street to avoid them, but kept on. They were on the look-out, I guess, because there was a stir and a small crowding in the entrance. Then the crowd melted, and when I came up there was only one man leaning in the door. It was Skinny Dink, trying to look calm and composed.

"Hi, Johnny."

I waited grimly for him to blurt out something more, but he didn't. It must have taken an effort of will. I said, "Coles been around?"

"Not here."

"Any idea where?"

"I wouldn't know, Johnny," he said in a thin tone.

I wanted to hit him. I knew why he'd taken a stand there. It was to stop me from going inside. My trade wasn't wanted. I grunted my contempt and turned away. And at that, suddenly encouraged, he found tongue.

"I know one thing, Johnny. You ought to know it too. You can't win. God on the mountain, you can't do it, Johnny!"

"Can't I?" I breathed. Between boldness and fright, he was actually pleading. All at once I was calm, the shakes gone and an unaccountable strength running through me.

"Pickett means exactly what he told you," Skinny argued. "Don't think otherwise. He's declared his intentions. He's laying low, but by moonrise he'll be looking for you. I was privately advised to see you weren't on these premises. I tried to reason, but he's like a man tetched. Nobody can talk to him."

"I'll talk to him. There are plenty better ways of dealing with Pickett Coles, but I'll talk to him. I'll stuff his stinking lie down his throat."

"What lie?"

"What's his excuse for shooting Joe Blue?"

"Oh," said Skinny. "You been hearing things. Somebody's got a big mouth. I suppose you mean—about Miss Melly. That's no lie, Johnny. Happens to be that's true."

"True?" I said stupidly.

"Meaning no reflections — there's been talk. No harm intended, but our Joe hardly knows us any more. Not to talk to. Last half dozen times in town he drove up in the Coles surrey, cool and distant as a deacon, and Miss Melly prim as a paper doll on the seat alongside—to do her shopping, of course. A couple of the boys have come upon them riding together on the range, and whatever else, they wern't working cows."

"What's wrong with that?"

"Nothing. Except that Miss Melly is a grown girl now. And she's still a Coles. Of the Alabama Coles, remember? I reckon' that's enough."

I thought I saw what he meant. Surely the most foolhardy fix an ignorant, penniless cowboy could get into was to fancy himself a ladykiller and the pretty daughter of the ranch languishing for love. Especially if he inclined to talk or drink too much. The least that could happen him was to be run out of the county; the worst was a fate no man cared to think about. Suddenly I had a clearer picture of Joe Blue as some others must think they saw him, but it didn't impress me. That's wasn't my Joe Blue, never.

But now I was getting somewhere. "Skinny, what's the town got again Joe?"

"Ironbound's got nothing whatever again him. It wasn't the town that shot him, remember. It was Pickett."

"Well, what specifi y has Pickett told the town?"

"Told? About his own sister, Johnny?" He was despairing. "Use your head. Think how he talked to you. You were Joe's friend, he picked a quarrel to get the jump on you. He didn't tell *you* why. He's let it be known around town that Joe Blue got too big for his britches and got whittled down. He didn't deny it concerned Miss Melly. We knew. When one man shoots another, and neither talks—you tend to mind your business. But you draw conclusions."

I SNEERED. "So you believe that Joe abused the good name—"

"Stop it, Johnny!" He was suddenly beside himself. "I won't stand to have your own words put into my mouth. Never mind what I think. It's a private concern. It's none of my business, it's none of yours either."

"I think it is. I'm out money. I spent a cool month's wages on a guitar."

He blinked. "What's that got to do with it?"

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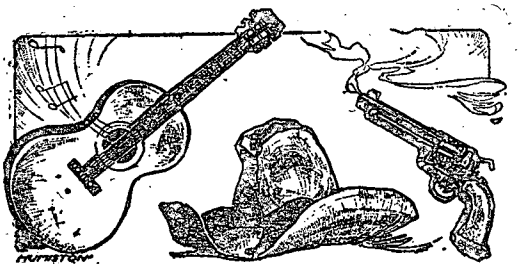
"It was for Joe to make music. Now he won't. So Pickett might like to buy it."

"Johnny, quit that, for God's sake! You're talking a shooting, you're building to a killing. Pickett Coles is gaited for murder."

I grinned. "I don't doubt it for a minute. A man that claims justification for homicide—his own sister's good name, no less—and settles for one shot that cripples a born music maker—that man is capable of stealing a hog's breakfast."



Now he was really speechless. His expression was tragic, as if he beheld a man doomed and departed from his senses.

"I'm probably keeping him waiting," I said. "I'll be back, Skinny. Your views interest me. Maybe you'll explain to me again how a town can talk a good main's reputation to tatters, and then claim no responsibility for what happens."

I left him with the thought and marched on up the street.

Oh, I marched like a true hero and champion, tough and hard as I talked, but the beat of my own blood sounded hollow as heeltraps on the plank sidewalk. That was always the way; big mouth and hot temper were sure to be two jumps ahead of stomach or head. I was no more a hero than Skinny Dink, only less honest.

But when I thought of Joe Blue and the guitar, of Joe lying hurt and alone and grimly saying nothing, of that creature Pickett preening and posing and ordering the world around at his pleasure—then I felt more mad and less sorry, mad enough, God help me, to cry in grief and exasperation. So I marched and couldn't turn back.

It was good the moon was late. Except for the puddles of light at the street lamps and the hazy glow from the larger resorts the sidewalks were dark. It was unlikely I'd run into Pickett on the street. But there was no telling about Marshal Weed. I played it safe. There was always one window or another which allowed a fair glimpse inside the places. I had no plan, only a burning intention.

IN PADDY GORMAN'S Gold Trace the piano was grinding like a hurdygurdy, the crowd was thin. I had no wish to face Paddy, so I was cautious, scouting from the porch. I wasn't cautious enough.

"Looking for somebody, Johnny?" mocked a voice. "You're a big boy now. They'll let you in."

A second passed before my heart resumed. In deep shadow along the wall a man sprawled on a bench. I recognized him for a shiftless, drifting Texan of no consequence, unless he chose to be a dangerous nuisance. He was pretty drunk.

"I'd walk in, Texas," I said curtly, "could I be sure of my company."

He got to his feet, a looming, unsteady figure. "Hell, man, try the Green River. Most exclusive place in town. Me, I got thrown out. Most the others just gulped their liquor and lighted out under their own power."

"That so? How come?"

"Try it and see, Stover. The stage is set for a fandango. I guarantee the warmest reception in town."

He laughed silently in unholy glee. But he did me one service. I could cut short my search. I cut short the acquaintance and swung off the porch. A small-sized experimental Rebel yell followed. That spelled trouble in my book, and I turned abruptly into a dark alley. Texas would attract the marshal like a magnet.

I knew where to go all right, but the underside of Main Street by night was too cluttered and baffling for any ease in getting there. I was impatiently feeling my way back to the sidewalk through a passage between buildings when a team and buckboard jingled past on Main Street. I caught only a glimpse. But that was enough; I was hot with conjecture. When I tried to run I got snarled in a tangle of old baling wire. By the time I reached the sidewalk the street was empty but for the saddle horses at the tie rails.

I wondered. What was there about a common buckboard with two people aboard

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to excite interest? The gaited horses maybe; they had a look about them, far traveled, probably hard. The couple on the seat had a look about them too, a quality of carriage and bearing.

"Cool and distant as a deacon." But that was Joe Blue. Joe was too distant, and no deacon. The man on the buckboard was no likeness, only a reminder. The thought bogged down. Just ahead was the Green River. I hadn't time for thinking.

The swing doors banged violently as I came to a halt just inside. The Green River kept up a pretension to elegance, and at its liveliest stayed on the sedate side. Tonight it was like a death watch. The horse-faced man behind the bar wore the all-wise, all condoling look of a prosperous undertaker. He'd be neutral, I judged, which was important.

There were half a dozen hushed, brooding customers before the bar. I sensed no menace there. The rest of the room and the tables were deserted except for one man against the far rear wall of the big room. He was playing solitaire and he looked up sharply. It was Pickett Coles.

I'll never know what passed through the mind of Pickett as he sighted me. He wore the dangerous, intense look of a treed bobcat watching the dogs draw near. He sat motionless, the deck of cards poised in one hand.

I began to walk into the room. It was as if someone else moved my feet, not me. After that one quick glance, I fixed my eyes on Pickett. This was his doing, his moment. I calculated in a flash that he had made a mistake and left me with a slight edge. But that was pure luck. I had nothing to do with it.

Then one of the men suddenly left the bar in a sidling move, easing toward the rear. It was hard to tell his intentions, to fight or to flee. Pickett commanded icily, "Get back there." The man obeyed without a word.

Belatedly it dawned on me. The fellow had aimed to fight, if need be. Pickett would have none of it. Treacherous he might be, monstrous his pride, yet he was helplessly true to what passed for his code. I was of the lesser breed; help was unthinkable. I was not impressed.

Next I put one careful hand on the coat button—and Pickett made a jerky movement. I halted. Quicker than the eye he had produced a gun, but that was all, he held his fire. I managed a smile, for this was my edge. He couldn't, didn't dare fire. The gun was a derringer, a nubbin no bigger than the palm of his hand. Deadly at close range, it was risky, suicidal at fifty feet or better. Pickett's mistake lay in talking too much, too soon. He had emptied the place.

So I opened the button and hooked both thumbs in the belt, exposing the butt of the Colt. I said, "I aim to talk to you, Pickett. Put that down."

NATURALLY he did nothing of the kind. He carefully put the deck of cards to one side. Then he braced his left hand against the table edge. The derringer was steady.

"Very well, mister. Just as you prefer." Deliberate, even downright ceremonious, I gambled and eased the Colt from the belt. Nothing happened. I might have been doing card tricks. I held the Colt high, muzzle to the ceiling, and slowly cocked the hammer till it clicked. Then I said, "We'll have it out here and now. I'll let you be judge of the distance. I'm ready to fire whenever you are, Pickett."

Then I resumed my walk.

You could hear the ticking of the tall Seth Thomas clock back of the bar. Somewhere on the street a Rebel yell rose, was choked off. Along the bar not a soul breathed. There was perspiration on the dead white of Pickett's face. I could feel it on mine. Every step I took whittled down my edge, but at least I was moving, advancing. Pickett only sat there, watching, waiting.

It knocked him out. Without warning, his body sagged. He put down the gun, and his head bent over the table as if taken sick. He pushed the gun away and gripped the edge of the table with both hands.

I felt a little sick too. It was like a drug fading away. The comeuppance was too sudden and complete. I was suspicious and furious with indecision. When I got to the table I only picked up the derringer and threw it through the nearest window with a shattering of glass.

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"What do you want?" Pickett said hoarsely. He cursed, looking at me like a wild man. "What the hell are you doing here?"

"I came here to kill you, Pickett," I told him. I was shaking a little myself. "That goes without saying. You fixed it that way, remember?"

"You can't do it. I quit, Stover. I'm through."

"Maybe. That'll take some doing. I can't say I'm glad."

"Put up the gun," he begged. "Damn it, put it away!"

I stared at him. Now what? My dislike and contempt had not abated one jot, but I was clean unprepared for such abject surrender. The man was without shred of shame or principle. I slid the gun under my belt and kicked a chair out from the table. I didn't know what else to do so I sat down. It was almost the last act of my life.

The second derringer must have been lying on his lap. It seemed to come out of thin air and explode in my face. I'd clean forgotten it, and that was his edge and he gambled on it.

Despair and hatred, if nothing else, blinded me. It was only a split second of time, but next I knew I was on my feet, Navy colt hot in my hand—the big table was overturned, chairs scattered — and Pickett Coles lay crumpled against the wall with a hole between his eyes. From the back of his head a sluggish ruby flood spread over the floor.

I stood witless. I was staggered to find myself alive. The customers recovered first. Two of them broke into profane, frightened argument and then bolted for the rear door. The horse-faced bartender hurried to my side, poking a chair at my legs and bidding me sit down. I snarled at him to leave me alone.

"It's all over," he soothed me grimly. "Take it easy. We'll get you out of here."

"The hell you will!"

"Steady, boy. Let's have a look at that. Maybe it's not as bad as it looks."

"What looks?"

"Your head. We'll fix the bleeding anyway. You'll be fit to travel."

"Me? Travel?"

"Before the marshal gets on to this. I had no hand in it, but I don't want no more shooting."

"Oh," I said. I put a hand to my face, my head. It came away wet and red. My knees trembled and I sat down exceedingly hard.

AN INSTANT later the front doors burst open and Marshal Weed ran in. He was breathing hard and his gun was in his hand. Clearly he'd been on his way when he heard the shots. Behind him shambled the big Texan with a hot and hungry eye.

Weed's pause was brief. Questions were superfluous. Then he jumped to examine Pickett Coles. There was nothing worth examining, and he slowly straightened.

The bartender's hand had faltered, but he kept on dabbing with a towel, peering at the wound. Only a crease, he muttered, a bad knock on the head but more showy than serious. Then without moving his lips he said in my ear, "The gun. Drop the gun."

I didn't get it. Then I did. I let the Navy Colt clatter to the floor.

Weed jerked about at the sound. His look was ugly. He got it too. While I held a gun, he could have shot me. Now it would be more difficult.

Imagination? Glancing at him, I hadn't a doubt in the world. I remembered that unwanted dog tied to the fence and the plunging shots and the distant look in Weed's eye. He'd failed to save Pickett Coles, but he could still save himself.

I couldn't stand the quiet any longer. "Tough turkey, Thurman? How's it feel to bet on the wrong horse?"

"The race ain't over, kid."

I laughed at him. "You want odds? Show your money."

"I don't need odds. I know a sure thing."

"Like shooting the winner in the stretch?"

He was silent. His icy calm was missing; he was sitting on the lid, and it was boiling. I felt lightheaded, reckless. The bullet, maybe. But I dreaded this man's chill remoteness more than his hatred. Any kind of human feeling was weakness, and maybe my salvation.

"Make up your mind," I said. "Are you city marshal or dogcatcher? Use that thing or put it away."

He cursed, and the cords of his lean neck

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were drawn and naked looking. "Stand up," he ordered.

The bartender said, "Hold on a minute. This needs some stitches, Marshal, and I can—"

"Git!" Weed said. "Back to your bar."

The man looked at him. Then he handed me the gory towel. I smiled and took it, and he walked away.

"Stand up," Weed repeated.

I decided to obey. I began to wonder if I was mistaken about him.

"The door. Git going."

I got going. The blued-steel .45 bore down on me, and he was in command. He stood fast, watching me. I could fairly feel his eyes like gimlets in my spine. I had a dim motion of his intentions, but couldn't believe it. The door. When I reached the threshold. When I—

Then I heard footsteps, saw legs arrive beneath the double door panels. The panels flew open, and a tall, sparse, military figure with a close-trimmed, whitening beard stopped dead. He paused to get the picture, and he got it. His eyes were blue-gray as ice on a winter lake.

The words came hard, but the diction was precise. "You're Stover, if I'm not mistaken, sir. My name is Coles."

I could only nod.

He said, "There's been a gunfight, I take it, and you shot my son?"

I was silent. That buckboard—the riddle was answered. The other passenger must be Miss Melly herself. But this paradeground figure! How to reply to a remark like that?

"Not a fight exactly, Major," I finally said. "But otherwise, correct."

He grunted, glanced at Weed. He studied him, grunted again. Then, unbelievably, he held out a stiff hand. "This is not in friendship, sir. It is your due in simple justice, if I appraise the situation correctly. I must make my position clear."

"Yes?" I said stupidly. I wiped my hand on a corner of the towel and gave it to him, not knowing what else to do. All hell was surely breaking loose inside him, yet his grip was firm, and his voice too, as if he had mastered all human feeling and thoroughly rehearsed his speech over the lonely miles to town.

"Pickett came here today, Stover, for the announced purpose of shooting you. I learned this too late to prevent him, so I drove in tonight in the company of my daughter to take whatever steps the circumstances require. I am forced to explain that last night I disowned my son for reasons both painful and sufficient. Were he still alive, I should deny the relationship. Deceased, I shall acknowledge and mourn him. But with him, I trust, will be buried all grief and rancor and regret. I hope, sir, you will manage to forget my misfortune as completely as I shall try to."

He pressed my hand and released it. The thing passed all belief. I stared at the hand. I couldn't see anything else for a red, roaring haze. My head hurt and I closed my eyes. Then I keeled over, they tell me, like the roof falling in.

WHEN I came around a little later I found myself lying on a couch in a back room of the Green River. The room was crowded with Paddy Gorman and a bunch, including Doc Sankey, who'd been doing a job. I was all cleaned up, with a neat bandage. Life came back with a rush, and I was badly rattled, shocked at my weakness and pretty embarrassed. I recalled I hadn't even let on I'd heard the Major's incredible speech, let alone thanked him.

"Take it easy, Johnny," Gorman commanded. "Lay still. You'll be all right."

"The hell with you, Gorman," I said, sitting up.

The Doc, fat, efficient and sharp of tongue, said, "Give him his head. He'll take it anyhow. He won't fall apart right away."

I looked from one to the other. They were away ahead of me. "The shooting is over?"

They both allowed it was.

"Good," I said. "That's the idea I got. But I could be mistaken."

There was no mistake. They repeated what little I knew already, added details to the Major's statement. The Major had now gone about his sad business, forbidding sympathy, exacting respect. No matter what anyone might think about his old-fashioned ways and ideas, he at least was sticking by his guns.

"This race to town tonight," Gorman said, "was due to a notion of Joe's. Joe had talked about meeting you. Pickett knew

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enough about you. After the trouble, Joe got to thinking it over and got scared. He told Miss Melly, who spoke to her dad. Pickett, I guess, had done a little strutting, talking around the stables, and the Major began asking questions. So pretty soon he called Miss Melly and they hitched up and came in together. It was a family matter, strict and urgent."

"Yes, I can see that," I allowed, though it was not true at all, especially for one detail. "But little Melly Coles—of the Alabama Coles—getting dragged into a Main Street gunfight? I thought this family foofuraw was all for shielding the females."

"I reckon it is—up to a point, which the women often decide. Miss Melly felt responsible. You are Joe's friend. Joe is—well, he'll mighty soon be her married husband."

"He'll be *what?*"

Bachelor Doc Sankey said, "Husband. Mutation of the human male. Well known. Some of my best friends—"

"You mean the Major knows this?" I demanded of Gorman. "Pickett knew it? You yourself, and you never spoke?"

He flushed. "I was one of few. It was Joe's place to talk, not mine. If he didn't —who was I to change his mind for him? And as for you, I'll speak plain—you're the damnedest, most difficult man to talk to in Frying Pan Valley!"

I let myself fall back and stared at the ceiling. Not from dismay. I was too mad. I didn't want to speak. I had an awful lot to think about suddenly.

I didn't get very far with it. They insisted on talking, and I had to let them talk. First they cleared the room. Much they had to tell was not, and clearly never would be, the common coin of gossip. They spelled each other, Gorman earnest or indignant, Sankey caustic and down-to-earth. The Doc had been to the ranch. They were the best informed men in town, and the little they lacked could be readily surmised. Gradually they put a story together, and I was compelled to acknowledge it and put it in the balance against my own feelings.

It was a rare and exceptional story, just as Joe and Melly were exceptional people. They were in love, had been a long time, without a word spoken. Joe was honorable and she dutiful, and they were in a fix they had never thought to forfend. It was the old story, but not the same sad pattern. When they spoke at last, finding they must, it was no talk of moonbeams. They found a way out, the hard way, but brave and honest.

Lying there and listening, I harked back to that night in the cabin. Joe had talked, soberly, excitedly by turns, of plans and prospects and never hinted at this. It was, I suppose, too risky, too sacred. He couldn't brag, couldn't trust his own happiness, and I never so much as dreamed.

Well, Joe was to quit the ranch this spring and file a claim. He'd build and prepare a home place. On a fateful day they'd quietly meet in town, get married, and on the way home—their home—they'd stop by for the Major's blessing. Or his blasting. Apart from the passing pain, it wouldn't matter. They'd neither expect nor need help. The Coles ranch was already Pickett's heritage. Like many another in the West they'd build their own.

Their own, mind. And I had debated, and blurted to thunderstruck Paddy Gorman, my fanciful notion of "throwing in" with Joe Blue. I couldn't "see" anything astonishing about it. I suffered for my innocence.

ANYWAY, so far so good. Joe and Melly were resolute. But trust Pickett to ferret out their secret. To a man of his stamp and fancy the thing was intolerable, unthinkable. To run to the old man would avail nothing—Melly threatened to run away, and meant it. To kill Joe out of hand would only backfire — the shocked countryside would conclude the worst. To cripple him, ruin his skill and his living—ah, that would eliminate him neatly. He'd eliminate himself. If it did provoke private wonder and talk, it would compel public silence.

I knew. It had damn near worked. I had run head-on into that public silence. Sourly I spoke up, reminding Gorman how right Pickett had been, then abruptly demanding the truth from the Doc about Joe's wound. I had to know right now.

Doc Stankey pursed his lips and shrugged. "I can't do better than quote a great man who preceded me three hundred years ago, the surgeon Paré. Nobody's said it better

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since. 'I dressed his wound and God healed him.' "

"You mean you're scared to give an opinion?"

"Not scared. Humble, maybe reverent. Confidentially, I think God is on Joe's side."

Gorman glowered, suspicious of such reverence, and dourly resumed his story.

UNFORTUNATELY for Pickett's scheme, it transpired, he had overreached himself altogether. His ideas of the style of life befitting a young man of his station fitted not at all with the views of a spartan father. The two were irreconcilable. It was a lifelong and losing contest for the Major. Prodigal habits, wine, women and cards, all the manly vices were in the gentleman's tradition. Only one thing lay beyond the pale of conduct: to bring dishonor to the name. This had happened.

Certain unsavory parties, the Major painfully learned, were raising a question about his own signature. They were gentlemen gamblers, by their own profession, insistent and probably dangerous. The question was a fair one. The signature, affixed to certain papers of indebtedness, was a bald forgery. The papers, along with evidence enough to jail a saint, became weapons of extortion. The Major paid up, and heavily, and the name was saved. But Pickett had gone too far.

It was not sheer coincidence that piled the shooting on top of this crisis. It was a thing bound to happen, sooner rather than later. In his anguish, the Major might have found some hairsplitting, legalistic evasion by which to condone either crime. Together they produced an upheaval of all his values and traditions that a lifetime of persuasion could not have accomplished.

In short, Major Coles bowed to the code of his people and stoically turned out the heir who had proved his unfitness beyond recall. Thereafter, honoring the simple precepts of a sermon once preached on a hallowed mount, he forgave and embraced the rash upstart who had long since displayed the character, ability and plain gumption to do right by the Coles honor and estate. The old man had lost a son—and gained a better.

Besides, Melly wanted him. You couldn't get around that. And I guess the Major wanted peace—and, no doubt, grandsons. Never in the balance of a lifetime would anyone ever hear him admit a regret.

That's the way it came to me in a back room at the Green River, all in a package neatly tied. You had to figure out for yourself the dreams and heartache, the cruelty and courage. And if you were me you could stop and think, just for a brief moment, how far out in the cold that left you—you and your Mex guitar and music and your friendships, with hell-to-breakfast on Main Street your idea of fitting reward for a winter of hell in the mountains. You were a dumb kid, and you knew it.

Paddy Gorman put it with pith and bluntness after Doc Stankey went along. By that time I was no longer lying nor even sitting, but up and marching the floor, wall to wall and back again.

"So now you know," he said. "You'll not be holding it against anyone that you weren't tenderly led aside and given a full accounting earlier. Nor against Joe for keeping his own counsel. What comfort or advice could you have given him?"

I shrugged. He grunted, and went on, "Nor against me neither, for I didn't know the Major had cut Pickett off, lock, stock and barrel. Weed didn't, nobody did. I knew Pickett had nigh ruined himself—but how could I be certain you wouldn't destroy Joe and distress us all by taking his revenge upon yourself. And wouldn't you have done just that?"

"I did it anyway."

"Ah, but this was Pickett's own doing. He was a desperate man. He stood alone, though none of us knew it. He tried to run you out of town—or better, kill you while his credit and standing lasted. Another day and it'd be too late, and he'd still have to face you, never knowing when you'd call for a showdown. You're transparent as branch water, Johnny—and unpredictable as a freshet in spring."

I halted. "I think you'd better explain that. I think it's time. You've told me off and whittled me down. I still don't get it."

"Don't get it?" He shook his head in wonder. "You've no notion? Hell, it's your damnable innocence. It scares a man. I won't call it bravery, because it's more a lack. Of

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experience, of getting hurt, of taking a licking and going on."

"You're talking about me, Johnny Stover?"

"Nobody else. I'm not trying to belittle you. But you're too cocksure, too quick to find a fight before it finds you. Your tongue is almost your undoing. You'll change, if luck holds. Without a proper measure of heartfelt fear, fear of God as well as evil, no man's judgment is any good, nor his courage. I don't think at this moment you've known honest fear."

"Me?" I abruptly sat down again. "Go on. I want all of this."

"That's all." For Paddy Gorman, he was almost embarrassed. "You're big and strong, and you can be brutal at need, and you have no pity for people who aren't and can't. Given a shove and a start, and you'd make a grand bully, even a killer. Given the insight to see yourself as others do, and the gift to see others as God made them—you could turn out a fine man. That's the sum of it, and my best recommendation."

I WAS grateful and grudgingly said so, but I was also bewildered. Paddy was wise and bluntly kind, and every word he said sounded true, yet I couldn't recognize myself in the picture. Sure, I'd talked big and slugged hard, but it was fear that drove me, oftener than anything, and me powerless to act, otherwise.

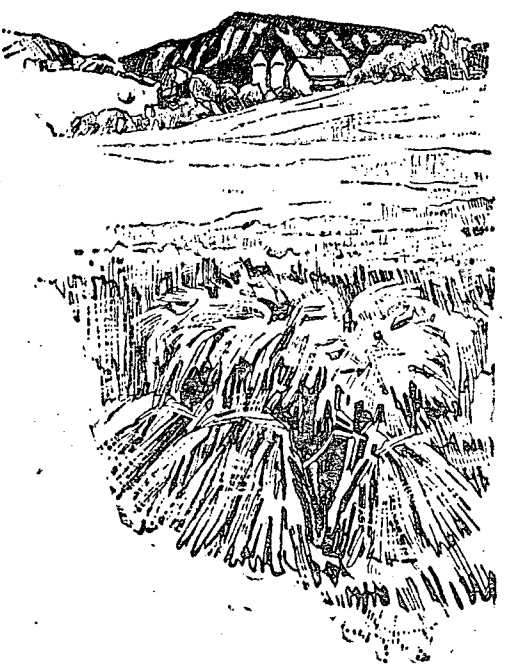
And in the end, this was the picture—Paddy's, the town's. Was it Joe's? And did a man go through life realizing always that even those nearest did not know him, would probably never know him in truth, only in a picture, often a poor one, and if a fine one, then almost surely a poor fraud?

I felt like a man marooned on an island. It was a new sensation. This, I thought, may be what they call finally coming of age.

Paddy Gorman sat still, waiting for me to say something. Neither of us noticed the knock on the door until it was repeated, gentle yet insistent. Paddy glanced at me, puzzled, then went to the door.

My first thought was—holy smoke, holy cow, is it real, am I dreaming? On the threshold stood Melly Coles. I knew her, yet it was like I'd never seen her before. The leggy, shy, pretty girl-child in pigtails was gone forever. She was a girl-woman now, and the difference would hit any man a blow between the eyes. Her light brown hair was upswept and demurely prim, the blue eyes were vivid and very sure of themselves, and the word pretty was a weak inadequate word for all that met a man's startled glance.

She was grave, hesitant. "I wish to speak



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to Mr. Stover, if it's all right. I have a message."

Paddy fell over himself ushering her in. I stood in the middle of the room, all tensed up. I couldn't guess how I stood with this girl. She walked directly up to me, straight-backed and dainty and smelling faintly of lemon verbena and sunlight and sage.

"I'm to call you Johnny," she announced. "By Joe's own command."

"Yes, Miss Coles—"

"Melly," she corrected. Her voice was like her gaze, clear and forthright and endearing.

"Melly," I said. "And how is Joe doing, ma'am?"

"He's doing fine."

"I'm glad to hear that, ma'am."

"In fact, he's doing too well for peace of mind. He'd have come here tonight if allowed. I wouldn't hear of it. It's better so. I'm glad he was spared this. He was in a state. He told me just what would happen, and we hurried, but we were just too late, and it did."

"I'm sorry, Miss Melly," I said, and meant it. I felt miserable.

There were quick tears in her eyes, but she fought them. "Regrets will mend nothing, Johnny. There's no good in talking now. The worst was good as done before we set out. Joe had little hope, really. He knew Pickett. He knew you."

I glanced at her. "Knew me?"

"Like a book, he says." She smiled wanly. "He's told me a lot. You mustn't mind. He sees a lot, our Joe. To tell you the truth, I think he knows me myself, time and again, better than I do."

"And I reckon you can cipher him pretty close too?"

The smile was warm and sweet. "I reckon so, Johnny. We've had plenty need of understanding, Joe and I."

It got me. It was another new idea, a small bare kernel like a fertile seed to plant and till and cultivate. A man need not be marooned forever. His own, close and dear, could know him and count on him and cherish the true picture, no matter its imperfections.

I said, "Tell Joe for me, ma'am—"

"Tell him yourself," she bade me. "Out at the ranch. Father and I will stay at the hotel tonight. Tomorrow—well, it will be late when we start. You might like better to go on ahead."

I knew that a funeral in the morning would delay their start, and I had no wish to take part. "But, Miss Melly, the circumstances—me, under that roof—won't your father—?"

"I assure you our house will be honored," she said with a sudden polite gravity that was pure Coles. "My father would be deeply grieved if you for an instant doubted his word and hand. Our house has suffered a tragedy, but after tomorrow morning it must never be mentioned again."

"Yes, Miss Melly," I said humbly. No mention, but thought and memory never die and they'd live on, locked in silence and pride. I said, "I'll remember. But that ain't all. You'll have to tell me. What about the —my guitar? I brought along a Mex guitar, pretty special."

I had to explain. It was a real problem now. Then there came a sudden light in her eye, quick with love and compassion—yes, and with cunning. "You take it, Johnny, take it along. It's just what he needs, what I need."

This, she had to explain. "He's trying already to ignore his wrist, to pretend to forget. He has forbidden any mention of it. He mustn't forget, we mustn't let him. He's got to humble himself and learn all over again every skill he ever knew. He can do it—Doctor Sankey told me—if only he's reconciled to the fact and has the will to fight and the humility to let us help."

"Well, if a guitar won't mortify him too much—"

"Bring it, and let it stare him out of countenance and mortify him without mercy. I don't think Joe's the man to run from a fight."

That tickled me. "I don't think so either, Miss Melly."

She put a hand on my arm and gave me a shake. "Melly!" she commanded. "I got strictest orders. If you call me that in front of Joe, I'll just die!"

She darn near scared me; then I darned near laughed outright. I guess I'll always be an innocent. But I felt pretty happy.

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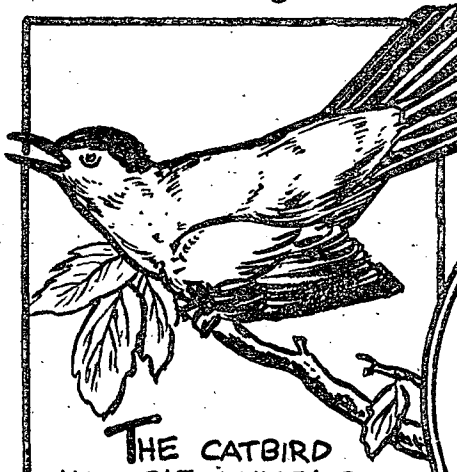
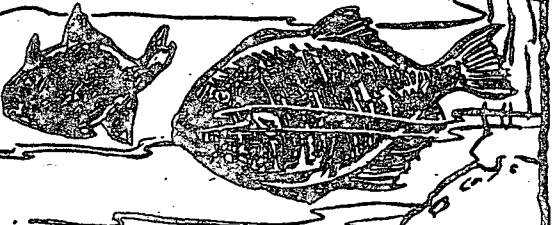
Curiosities By Weill

CHOW DOGS ARE BELIEVED TO HAVE ORIGINATED IN NORTH CHINA AND ARE THE ONLY ANIMALS IN THE WORLD, BESIDES THE POLAR BEAR, WHO HAVE A BLACK TONGUE!



THE CATBIRD HAS THE ABILITY TO IMITATE THE FLUTE, CELLO, CLARINET AND PICCOLO!

IN CULTIVATION SINCE 300 B.C., THE BEET NOW SUPPLIES ONE-HALF THE WORLD'S SUGAR SUPPLY



THOUGH SMALL, THE JAWS OF THE HAWAIIAN BLACK TRIGGERFISH ARE SO POWERFUL, HE CAN BITE A NO. 3 FISH HOOK IN TWO!

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FORECLOSURE ON HALFADAY

OLD CUSH, proprietor of Cushing's Fort, the combined trading post and saloon that served the little community of outlawed men that had sprung up on Halfaday Creek close against the Yukon-Alaska border, folded the month-old newspaper he had been reading and, reaching onto the back bar, set out a bottle, two glasses, and the leather dice box as Black John Smith stepped into the room and crossed to the bar.

Picking up the box, the big man shook three sixes. "I'm leavin' 'em," he said. "Three sixes in one is above the average."

Cush gathered the dice into the box and rolled out three aces. "Yer allus talkin' about averages an' the like of that, but what I claim dice shakin' is like anythin' else—sometimes you win, an' sometimes you lose.

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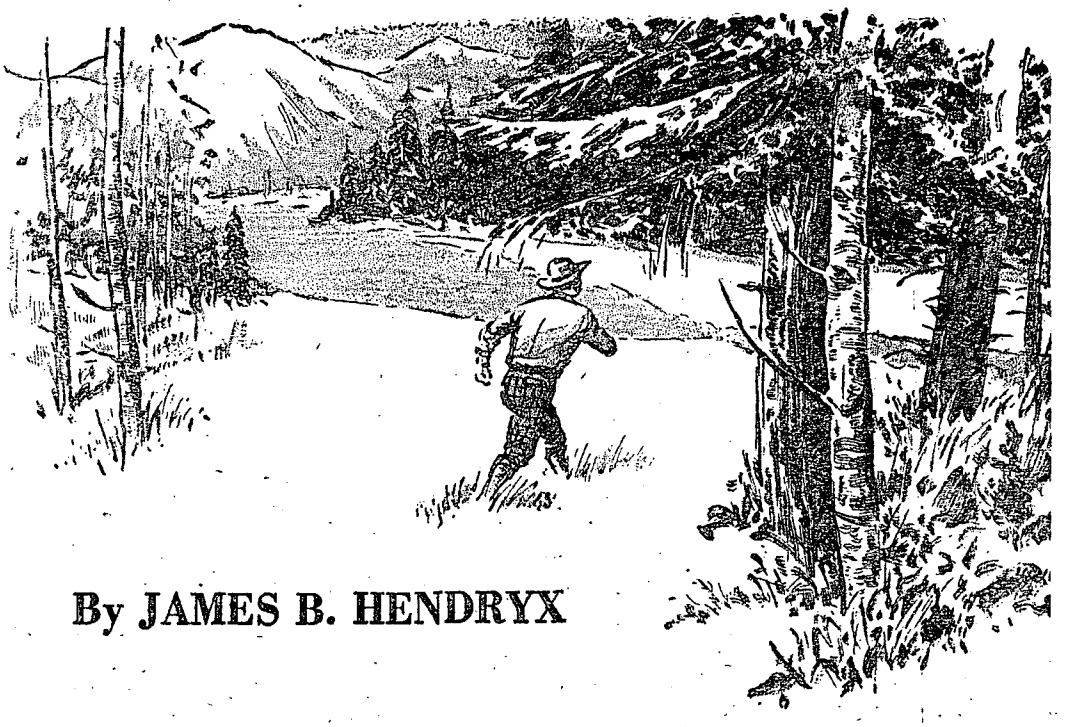

By JAMES B. HENDRYX

It Was Black John's Considered Opinion That You Can't Take the Stink Out of a Skunk by Tying a Ribbon Around Its Neck

Sometimes a pair of treys would win, an' sometimes five sixes could git beat. It's accordin' if yer lucky er if you ain't." He returned the dice to the box, shook them out again, and eyed the big man across the bar. "There's a pair of fives. Accordin' to this here law of averages of yourn, they ain't no good to leave in one, be they?"

"W-e-e-l-l, off hand, I'd say that the mathematical probability of——"

Cush interrupted him with a scowl. "I don't want to stand here an' listen to no sermon which wouldn't mean nothin' when you got it preached. I'm leavin' them two fives. Go ahead an' beat 'em if you kin."

Black John picked up the box, rolled out the dice, and regarded a pair of fours with disfavor. Cush made an entry in his day book, and shoved the bottle across the bar. "That proves yer law of averages ain't worth a damn, an' never was. It's like I says—if yer lucky you win, an' if you ain't, you lose. Take old Pat Finnigan, now—"

"What's Pat got to do with it?" Black John interrupted.

"Pat, he's more proof that this here law of averages yer allus hollerin' about is the bunk. Pat, he shows up along in January with a poke of dust in his pocket. He's broke come Spring, an' he wants I should grubstake him fer a trip out in the hills. He's old, an' he don't know the country, an' he don't know nothin' about prospectin', never havin' done nothin' sence he hit the country but chop cordwood fer the steamboats. So I turns him down on the grubstake, but I lets him have a pick, an' pan, an' shovel, an' a month's grub on his promise that if he don't strike nothin' he'll work it out doin' chores around the fort.

"He hits up this crick, which everyone else has passed up, 'cause it don't look no good. He's on the run fer somethin'—you kin bet on that. An' the reason he hit the crick is 'cause it's clost to the line so if a police shows up he kin step acrost into Alasky. That's three months ago—an' you know the rest. He goes four mile up it an' starts shovellin' twenty, thirty dollars to the pan right out of the grass ruts—jest like Carmack done on Bonanza. So he names his crick Lucky Crick, an' all the rest of the

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boys on Halfaday hits up there an' prospects the crick from the mouth clean to the head of it—an' not a damn one of 'em even hits a color! Red John an' Short John got back last night. They was the last ones to quit, an' they claim there ain't another payin' location on the hull damn crick. Now what I claim—if yer law of averages was worth a damn, how come some old cuss like Pat would hit some crick which everyone with any sense had passed up, go half ways up it, an' start shovellin' dust out of the grass ruts, in a place that don't look no more promisin' than any other part of the crick? An' all the other boys that's good prospectors tears up the gravel fer four mile each way from him, an' don't strike a damn color! What's yer law of averages got to say about that?"

"It's an incontrovertible fact that inherently—"

"You kin swaller all the rest of the big words you aim to spit out, like you allus do when you git cornered, 'cause I ain't listenin'. An' not only old Pat hits the richest location in these here parts, but he's got it all fer hisself, 'cause I turned him down on that grubstake. Cripes, if I'd of took him up, half that claim would be'n mine! Pat, he's jest nach'lly lucky—an' no averages about it."

Black John grinned. "He's lucky, all right. I'd forgot he named his crick Lucky Crick. The boys all call it Finnigan's Crick."

"Why the hell wouldn't they? Not a damn one of 'em had no luck on it—only Pat. An' that there other crick that runs along side of Finnigan's Crick, jest over the ridge from it, ain't no better. The boys prospected it, too. Struck a few colors, here an' there, but nothin' as good as what they had here on Halfaday. Chances is, there ain't even one good location on it. The boys all give it up, all but that there young Joe Tuttle—him that married Bill Emmet's gal. Joe, he's got faith in that crick, an' so's Ada. They come in there three, four months ago an' be'n prospectin' it ever sence. Red John, he was talkin' to 'em the other day, an' Joe told him they was jest about makin' wages. They built 'em a little shack jest over the ridge from Finnigan's, an' they're sinkin' a shaft there. Red John says Joe told him he figgers that mebbe Finnigan's pocket stretched clean acrost in under the ridge, an' he might hit it on this other crick. Red John says the ridge ain't very high nor very wide there. Joe an' Ada ain't recorded no location yet. They're jest prospectin'."

BLACK JOHN nodded. "Yeah, I was through there not long ago. They're a nice couple—them young folks. Joe, he's a hard workin' fella, an' Ada Emmet, she's a sourdough born. I'd like to see 'em make good."

"Why, shore," Cush agreed. "But they ain't goin' to do no good where they're at. They better hit out an' find 'em another crick."

"Gold's where you find it," Black John reminded. "They might hit it lucky. Finnigan did. An' his crick don't look a damn bit better than the one they're on."

"An' who the hell's takin' me name in vain?"

Black John turned at the sound of the voice and smiled into the twinkling blue eyes of the little old man who advanced toward the bar. "Speak of the devil, an' up he pops."

"Divil, er not—it's me that's here, wid a poke o' dust 'twould choke a moose. 'Tis me birthday, an' I'm takin' the day off to celebrate."

"Your birthday, eh? How'd the old world look a hundred years ago today?"

"'Twas a damn fine day. I didn't git here till twinty-five year later. I'm siventy-five year old today, an' I was born on me mother's twinty-fifth birthday. So I know a hundred year ago today was a damn fine day for the world, when a woman like her was born into it."

The big man's smile widened. "You're all right, Pat. That's as fine a tribute as I ever heard. Fill up, Cush is buyin' one."

For answer the little man produced a moosehide poke which thudded heavily on the bar. "The drinks is on me."

One Armed John stepped into the room carrying a string of fish. Cush scowled at him from behind the bar. "Take them damn fish outa here! I sure ain't agoin' to have the bar slimed up—nor neither yet the floor!"

Old Pat glanced at the one armed one. "Hold on!" he cried. "What's them fish worth?"

One Armed John held them up for inspection. "They's some nice ones here—I

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jest ketched 'em. I'd ort to git half an ounce."

"Half an ounce—hell! I'll give ye an ounce. Take 'em out back an' tell Cush's klooch to fry 'em up fer supper. Ye've saved me life—er mebbe only me soul. Hadn't ye showed up wid them fish, I'd had to go hungry, er else git tossed into hell fer eatin' moose meat on a Friday. When ye git shet of the fish, I'll give ye another ounce to go up an' down the crick an' tell the boys to come on in to Cush's, an' help me celebrate me birthday. Tell 'em the drinks is all on me, an' tonight we'll have a stud game—an' tell 'em I hope I lose."

"Hope you lose?" asked Cush, as One Armed disappeared, "why would anyone hope he'd lose in a stud game?"

" 'Tis like this—if I'm reasonably diligent wid me drink', be supper time I'll be feelin' fine. After supper we'll play stud. If I lose I'll hit out fer home in the mornin', still feelin' fine. If I win, I'll have to stay around mebbe a day er two blowin' in me winnin's, an' it's gittin' so, lately, that a two, three day's drunk is hard on me guts. I wouldn't feel good fer a week."

BLACK JOHN laughed. "Why not bank your winnin's here with Cush, or carry 'em back to the crick an' cache 'em? Cripes, man, if you'd really get to work on that location of yours, you could lay out a hundred thousand er so fer pipe an' tap that little lake back in the hills an' sluice out enough dust to fill the safe here in six months time. Or if you didn't bank it, you could cache enough there in the rocks to make you a millionaire."

"An' what's the good of it? I'm an old man. So far as I know I've got nary kith nor kin in the world to leave it to. Why should I work like hell fer six months an' shove it in Cush's safe, so when I die ye boys could divide it amongst ye, er else blow it in drinkin' an' playin' stud? Nussir, if there's any drinkin' an' stud playin' wid my dust, I'm a-goin' to be in on it meself! An' as fer cachin' it—why should I tear out the bone to bury a lot of dust somewheres in the rocks? Hell, it's in the ground a'ready! Let whoever's goin' to spend it after I'm gone dig it out. Like now, I ain't got a worry in the world. If I had a cache, I'd be worryin' fer fear someone might rob it. But wid the dust layin' there in the gravel, there can't no one dig a hell of a lot of it before I'd ketch 'em at it. Take it like now, if I need some supplies, er felt like doin' a bit of drinkin' an' card playin', all I got to do is work fer half a day wid me shovel an' pan, put the dust in me poke, an' come down here to Cush's."

"Seems like sound philosophy, at that," the big man agreed.

" 'Tain't no philosophy about it. It's jest common sense."

"If I was you I'd record that location, though."

"Well, you ain't me—so I ain't recorded it. Why the hell should I record it? 'Twas pure luck made me start diggin' there where I did, an' hittin' the only pocket on the hull damn crick. But it worn't luck that put me on that crick. Nussir. I hit up that crick 'cause it run right up agin' the line where if the police come huntin' me I could step over into Alasky. I shot Gus Huber, an' if the police would find his body, they'd have me dead to rights. An' if I'd record me location they'd know where to find me. Me an' Huber took a contract to git out a thousan' cords of wood fer the steamboats. We put up a shack an' went to work. I didn't know much about Huber, then. But by Christmas time I know'd plenty.

"Mike O'Leary was workin' a claim on a crick a couple of mile from our shack. His daughter Mary lived wid him—as likely a lass as a man would want to see. Gus Huber was a big broth of a lad, mebbe risin' of thirty. 'Twas not long before he'd tuk to walkin' acrost to O'Leary's of a Sunday, an' now an' agin of a moonlight night. At first I didn't blame him fer that, figgerin' he was courtin' Mary an' how mebbe they'd be gittin' married. One night I twigged him about it—an' 'twas then I found he'd an evil mind. He winked and grinned a wicked grin. "Give me a little more time," he says, "an' I'll git what I want widout marryin'."

" 'If that's what ye're up to, Gus Huber,' I says, 'ye'll not git away wid it. I'll tell Mike O'Leary to warn Mary to have nothin' more to do wid you.'

" 'One word out ye,' he says, 'an' it'll be yer last word. Ye mind ye're own business an' I'll mind mine.'

"Gus, he was bigger than me, so I shet up, but I made up me mind to keep an eye

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on him, fer I wanted no harm to come to the girl.

"Come Chris'mas time me an' Gus hits fer Dawson fer to celebrate a bit. We draws what money we had comin' on the contract, an' Gus he tries to hold out on me an' we have a row there in the Tivoli, an' some of the sourdoughs hears it. Later Downey claimed someone heard me threaten him. Mebbe I did, but when he came acrost wid my share the row was over.

"We're in the Klondike Palace, one night, an' I take on a bit of a load an' git sleepy. So I crawls in one of them booths there in the dance hall an' takes me a snooze. When I wakes up I hears someone talkin' in the next booth. I recognize Gus Huber's voice. 'She's a knock-out fer looks,' he's sayin', 'an' ye'll have to pay high fer her.'

" 'How do I know she'll work in?' says another voice. 'An' how you goin' to git her here?'

" 'She'll work in, all right. She's livin' on a crick wid her old man near where I'm workin'. It won't be long, now—an' when the time's right, somethin's goin' to happen to the old man—an' then I'll fetch her in.'

" 'Okay,' say the other one, 'but mind ye, I'm lookin' her over before I put out a damn cent.'

"They gits up an' steps out of the booth, an' I peeks out of my booth an' sees Gus an' Cuter Malone walk to the bar.

"The next day we hits back to camp, an' come Sunday, Gus shaves an' steps out the door. 'Where ye goin'?' I says. 'Where d'ye s'pose?' says he, wid a grin an' a wink. 'I s'pose ye're headin' fer O'Leary's,' I says, 'but ye better change ye're mind.' Wid that he whirls on me wid an ugly look in his eye. 'You mind ye're own business, ye old fool," he says, 'an' ye'll live longer.' An' then he turns around an' heads into the bush.

"I PICKS up the old carbine we've got there an' follers him out an' when he's crossin' a bit of slashin' I lets him have it. 'Tis a still mornin', an' wid the black powder cat'ridges we had that old carbine roared like a cannon. I stud there a long time smellin' the powder smoke an' starin' at the spot where Gus Huber had dropped, mebbe it's fifty yards away. 'Pat Finnigan,' I says to meself, 'ye've killed a man.' 'Twas a turrible feelin' come over me standin' there in the bush an' I was wishin' wid all me heart that Gus Huber was alive agin. Then I thought of Mike O'Leary an' Mary there on the crick—an' what would have happened to them—an' the feelin' passed, an' I was glad I'd shot him. 'But the police will call it murder,' I says, an' a feelin' of fear come over me. I'd seen 'em hang O'Brien fer murder in Dawson—an' I seen meself in O'Brien's shoes, standin' there on the scafford waitin' fer 'em to spring the trap. 'Let 'em call it what they will,' I says. 'Twas a good deed—an' ketchin' comes before hangin'.'

" 'Twas then I noticed it had started to snow. I walks over to Gus an' looks down at him. I seen where the bullet had ketched him in the back of the head but hadn't gone on through. First I thought of splittin' his head an' gittin' the bullet, an' droppin' it along wid the carbine an' the rest of the cat'ridges through a hole in the ice in the river. 'Cause I know'd if the Mounted Corporal ever found Gus, an' got that bullet they'd know it come from that old carbine of mine, them knowin' 'twas the only one like it in the country. But I had no stummick fer splittin' his head open an' messin' around amongst his brains fer the bullet.

"The snow come down faster, fine snow, almost like fog, it was. I went back to the shack an' fetched the sled an' loaded Gus onto ut, an' drug him to the river. I chopped a hole in the ice an' shoved him through it. Then I went back to the shack. The wind come up, an' fer two days the blizzard roared, an' when 'twas over there was big drifts along the river, an' the snow laid deep in the slashin'."

The old man paused, ordered another round of drinks, and resumed. " 'Tis hell how things works out. 'Tis the next Sunday, an' I'm settin' there in the shack readin' a magazine Gus had fetched down wid him from Dawson. But I didn't take no comfort in it. There was murders an' shootin's an' killin's of one kind an' another—an' some of 'em looked like they was pulled off pretty smart—but every damn time the shuriff, er police, was smarter, an' the one that done the killin' got ketched, an' evidence enough agin him to hang him higher'n hell. It's a wonder the ones that writes them stories don't give a killer a

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break, now an' then. The more I read the jumpier I got, an' when all to onct someone give a yell outside the shack, I damn near jumped through the roof. I opens the door, an' there's Mike O'Leary an' Mary. 'Come in,' I says, hearty, bein' glad I'd have someone to talk to. They done so, an' Mary, she looks around. 'Where's Gus?' she says. 'I looked fer him to come over last Sunday, an' agin today, so when he didn't show up, I was afraid he might be sick er somethin'.'

" 'No,' I says, 'Gus ain't sick. Leastwise,' I says, 'he worn't sick when he went away.'

" 'Went away!' she says. 'Where did he go?'

" 'He went down the river a ways,' I says.

" 'That's funny,' she says. ' 'Cause he promised me he'd come over the first Sunday he got back from Dawson an' fetch me a present. He was here last Sunday, wasn't he?'

" 'Sure,' I says, 'he was here part of the day. 'Twas last Sunday he headed downriver.'

" 'When'll he be back?' Mary says.

" 'He didn't say,' I tells her.

" 'I seen how Mike's eye had be'n sort of rovin' around the shack an' then they swung on me wid a hard look in 'em. An there was a hard sound to his voice when he says, 'I take notice that Gus's packsack is there under his bunk, an' his extra clothes is hangin' there on the nails. D'ye mean to tell me, Pat Finnigan, that he headed downriver in the face of a blizzard, like last Sunday, wid neither pack nor dog outfit? Where downriver was he goin'?'

" 'He didn't say,' I says.

"Wid that Mike got up an' stud there glarin' down at me. 'Ye're a damn liar, Pat Finnigan!' he says, an' his voice sounds gritty, like draggin' a sled over gravel. 'Gus warned us a while back that ye'd prob'ly try to come betwixt him an' Mary in some way er another—as if Mary'd look twict at an old coot, like you! But we didn't think ye'd resort to murder.'

" 'What d'ye mean—murder?' I says, a cold chill runnin' up an' down me spine at sound of the word.

" 'I mean jest what I said—murder!' his voice roarin' the words in me ears. An' wid that, he reaches behind the door an' picks up me old carbine. ' 'Tis plain as day what happened,' he says. 'Ye git back from Dawson, an' come Sunday, Gus cleans up an' wid Mary's present in his pocket, he hits fer our place, an' ye take this gun an' foller him, an' when ye see ye're chanct, ye let him have ut—shoot him down from behind like a dog. Then the blizzard covers him deep wid snow. But ye'll not git away wid it. Me an' Mary's hittin' fer Dawson to have a talk wid Corporal Downey, an' we're takin' yer gun along. If ye shot him, an' be chanct the bullet didn't go on through, ye're goose'll be cooked when the police find his body. Remember, Pat Finnigan,' he says, 'a murderer always gits ketched. I rec'lect seein' ye there lookin' on when they hung O'Brien—an' ye kin bet ye're last dollar me an' Mary'll be there lookin' on when they're hangin' you!'

"The shack sounded awful still when Mike got through. I could hear the alarm clock tickin' on the shelf. The two of 'em—Mary sittin' on the edge of Gus Huber's bunk, an' Mike standin' betwixt me an' the door, was glarin' at me wid hate in their eyes. I done some quick thinkin'. I seen how me story about Gus headin' downriver in the face of a blizzard widout no pack was a foolish one. An' I tried to take comfort in knowin' that widout no corpse they can't prove no murder. But then I didn't know how far downriver Gus would go. Mebbe, if the current took him clean over into Alasky I'd be all right. But agin, if he'd git ketched in an eddy he might spin around right there at the wood landin' till the ice went out—an' knowin' Gus like I did, I wouldn't put it past the damn cuss to do just that. After all, I thinks, what I done I done to save the girl, so I decided to resort to tellin' 'em the truth. I done so—but it only made 'em the madder. They didn't believe a word I spoke. 'Ye dirty lyin' snake!' Mary cried, her voice high pitched an' quivering wid rage. 'Gus Huber was a fine man! We'd be'n married, come Spring, if ye hadn't murdered him in cold blood!'

" 'Ye've lied to us onct,' says Mike. 'An' a man that'll lie onct will lie twict—an' keep on lyin'. An' jest to fix it so ye'll not be able to dig pore Gus out from under the snow an' make away wid his body, ye're goin' to Dawson along wid us—an' we're hittin' out right now.'

" 'I ain't goin' to Dawson,' I says.

" 'The hell an' you ain't!' says Mike.

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" 'Be God, ye'll go on ye're two feet, er I knock ye out wid this gun bar'l an' pack ye there on me back,' he says.

"Mike, he's bigger'n me, an' he's got the gun—an' there's Mary who's strong as any man. I seen how the odds was agin me, so I agrees to go along.

"So we hit the trail, an' 'tis near midnight, an' black dark when we slant up the bank from the river, there by the old sawmill. Mary's ahead, an' Gus is behind me an' when we git to the top of the bank I pretends to slip an' fall down. I grabs Mike by the legs, an' flips him over the bank, an' before Mary kin turn around, I shoves her over, too, an' they go rollin' down through the snow.

"I'm in a hell of a fix. I know'd most of the sourdoughs from back when I took wood contracts around Fortymile, an' I want to connect up wid 'em. But I don't dast to show up at the Tivoli, where I figgered they'd be playin' stud. So I sneaks around into Bettles' cabin an' lays down on his extry bunk. After a while he comes in, an' Swiftwater Bill wid him. I tell 'em the truth about what come off, an' how I done it to save Mary, an' how the two of 'em turned agin me like I was a mad dog, er somethin'. The two of 'em set there an' laughed like it was a hell of a joke on me. But I can't see no joke in me gittin' hung—an' I tells 'em so.

" 'They ain't apt to be hangin' you, Pat,' Bettles says. 'The chances is Gus'll slip on through Alasky an' clean down to Norton Sound, come spring.'

" 'Ye don't know the damn cuss like I do,' I says. 'Twould be jest like him to spin around in under the ice all winter in some eddy an' then when the break-up comes to pop up right in front of Downey's canoe wid that bullet in his head—an' Downey havin' me gun to fit the bullet in.

"Swiftwater nods his head. 'Yeah,' he says, 'Gus Haber wasn't no blue chip in any man's game—an' Downey damn well knows it. But still an' all, shootin' him from behind, like ye done, might be considered an infringement of some law, at that.'

" 'Me conscience is clear,' I says. 'Twas the only way I seen to save the girl. I'd nothin' to go to the police wid. If I told 'em what I heard in the Palace, both Cuter an' Gus would lie out of it—an' the police couldn't do a damn thing till it was too late. Even with Mike an' Mary turned agin me, I'm glad I done ut.'

" 'I claim ye done right,' Bettles says.

" 'Me, too,' says Swiftwater. 'If I was you I'd lay low till spring, an' see if they find Gus.'

" 'Layin' low would be fine,' I says, 'but I ain't got nothin' to lay low on— an' nowheres to lay, if I had it. Me an' Gus draw'd all the money we had comin' on our contract, an' blowed it in around Chris'mas. I dastn't go back to me shack—an' I ain't got no money fer grub.'

" 'Ye better hit fer Halfaday Crick,' Bettles says, pullin' a poke out of his pocket an' tossin' it to me. 'There's dust enough in there to feed ye till Spring an' a few drinks on the side.'

" 'An' I've got a good dog team,' Swiftwater says. 'In the mornin' I'll git an outfit of blankets an' grub, an' hire a Siwash to take you to Halfaday. Ye'll be hittin' out, come dark tomorrow night.'

'Twas damn white of them boys to help an old man out, an' them not expectin' to git a damn cent back. But they did git ut back—an' more with it. The dust was in them two pokes I sent down to 'em, when you went to Dawson last month, John."

BLACK JOHN nodded. "Yeah, they didn't want to take it, but I told 'em you was lousy with dust— that you'd hit the richest pocket in the Halfaday country. The fact is, Pat, I knew why you was here all along. Swiftwater sent a letter up by the Siwash that brought you here, so in case the police showed up, I could keep you out of sight. I'm like Bettles an' Swiftwater—I believe you done right in riddin' the country of a low-lived skunk. But here it's July, an' the chances are that if they haven't found Gus Huber's corpse by this time they never will find it. So I figure you'd be pretty safe in recordin' your location."

"Pretty safe ain't safe enough to suit me. I ain't takin' no chances on Gus Huber—if you'd know'd him like I do, you'd know 'twould be jest like him to ketch in some rock er stick in the mud on the bottom of the river, till I got to feelin' I was safe, an' then pop up fer Downey to find. Nussir. I'm settin' pretty like I be. I've got me claim, an' there ain't no one goin' to

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jump ut. Most of the boys here on the crick wouldn't want to—an' them that would, dastn't, knowin' damn well you'd hang 'em if they did—an' that goes fer anyone down along the river. They all know how you hang folks up here that don't mind their own business.

"Even if the police should find Gus an' find out where I'm at, I'd still be settin' pretty. I'd step acrost the line an' thumb me nose at um. Ye asked me a while back why I didn't git out me dust an' cache it. I'm tellin' ye now, I have got a hundred pound of it cached—over on the Alasky side of the line. Twinty-five thousan' dollars it figgers, enough to keep me as long as I'll ever live—so no matter which way the cat jumps, I'll have all I kin eat, an' all I kin drink, an' all the stud playin' I'll ever want—so what more could a man ask?"

Black John grinned. "I guess you win, Pat," he said. "Well, drink up. I see Pot Gutted John an' Red John comin' acrost the clearin'. It looks like One Armed John is roustin' out the guests for your birthday party. Here's to you— an' I hope I'll be settin' as pretty as you are when I'm seventy-five."

"Huh," Cush grunted behind the bar, "you won't never see seventy-five—an' even if you do, you won't be settin' pretty—some good lookin' woman will have took you fer all you've got long before that, the way you fall fer 'em. You've be'n lucky so fer—but luck like that can't hold. Me, I know. I'm a four-time loser, myself!"

II

DESPITE the old man's expressed desire to lose in the stud game that evening, the cards decreed otherwise and he won enough dust to finance a three-day spree. On the morning of the fourth day he headed for home fortified with half a dozen good stiff drinks.

Late that same afternoon Joe Tuttle appeared at Cush's and accosted Black John. "Is there a doctor here on Halfaday?" he asked.

The big man shook his head. "Not at present. The last doctor to sojourn amongst us deemed it expedient to step acrost into Alaska one time when Corporal Downey showed up on the crick, an' he ain't been heard from sence. Not," he added with a grin, "that the medical profession would suffer any great loss if he never is heard from. Why? Who's sick?"

"It's old Pat Finnigan. Ada and I heard someone yelling along about noon, and we investigated and found old Pat with his leg wedged in between a couple of rocks. He'd slipped and fallen and rolled part way down the ridge where the trail slants down to his shack. He said he'd been over here for a couple of days celebrating his birthday—and I guess he celebrated, all right. His breath smells like he'd swallowed a distillery. We found his leg broken and made him comfortable. Ada stayed there with him and I went home and made a litter out of a couple of poles and some canvas, and we carried him to his shack and put him to bed. Ada is staying there with him and I came over here to see if I could find a doctor."

"Where is it broke? An' how bad? Is the bone smashed, or splintered, or stickin' out through the skin?"

"No. It's his shin bone, and it's broken about half way between his knee and his ankle. It doesn't appear to be too bad a break, but neither Ada nor I know much about such things, and we didn't want to monkey with it, and maybe do the wrong thing."

"I don't claim to be a doctor, but I've had more or less experience with broken bones. We'll go over an' have a look at it an' if it ain't too bad, I guess we can set it."

Cush set a bottle of whiskey on the bar. "Take that along," he advised. "It'll prob'ly hurt like hell when you git to messin' around that leg, an' a couple of good stiff drinks'll ease it up."

Tuttle pocketed the bottle with a grin. "A couple of good stiff drinks on top of what he's got in him now, and we could cut his leg off without him knowing it."

THE injury proved to be a simple facture, and, thanks to the handling of the Tuttles in moving him to his shack, there had been no displacement, and it was a comparatively easy matter to fit the ends of the bone into place and apply splints and a bandage.

It was some six weeks later, while on a moose hunt back in the hills, that Black

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John dropped in on the old man to see how he was getting along. He found him hobbling about with the aid of a stout cane. "How's the leg comin'?" he asked.

"Fine! I be'n walkin' around on ut fer a week. Another week an' I'll be able to git over to Cush's fer a bit of a drink, an' a game of stud. An' be God, this time I hope I do lose! What I claim, them three, four day drunks is too hard on a man."

"You say you've be'n walkin' around for a week—how'd you manage here alone before you could walk around?"

"I wasn't here alone. Ada Tuttle, she moved over here, an' she tuk care of me jest like she was me own darter. There's two as fine young folks as ever walked in shoe leather! Ada she give the shack a hell of a cleanin' out, an' then she kep' ut clean, an' she done the cookin', an' fed me me meals, an' Joe he come acrost the ridge every day an' cut the wood an' fetched it in, an' carried the water."

"How they doin' over there?" Black John asked.

"They ain't doin' no good, an' it's a damn shame. They've got faith in that crick, an' they're stickin' wid it. They build their shack right acrost from mine, hopin' this pocket I hit reaches clear acrost in under the ridge. But I'm doubtin' it. I never heard tell of no pocket stretchin' in under no ridge. They're workin' like hell, sinkin' shafts, an' takin' out jest enough to live on—an' they live slim. They ain't recorded their location, yet. They're waitin' to see what they strike. Joe, he ain't no minin' man. His heart ain't in minin'. He wants to make a strike so he kin go back to the States, an' go to some college an' learn to be a doctor."

Black John eyed the oldster. "I believe you told me once that you didn't have no folks of your own, didn't you?"

"Nary kith nor kin in the world that I know of."

"An' you've got a location here that's bound to pay out more dust that you can ever use—why don't you stake young Tuttle to an education? It would be a fine thing to do. He could pay you back after he got going."

"Pay me back! If he ever tried to pay me back I'd smash me cane over the head of um! They've more than paid me back, a'ready—them two. I've offered to do that. But they won't take a damn cent off me. I've begged 'em, an' I've cussed 'em, an' it don't do no good. They've got a pride to 'em—an' they're stubborn as Mulligan's hog. But there's sure one thing I kin do, an' they can't stop me—I kin leave 'em this location, when I'm gone."

The big man nodded. "Yes, you could do that—but hell, Pat, as tough an old devil as you are, you're apt to live as long as they do. Joe'd look like hell goin' to college with a long gray beard."

THE old man shook his head. "That's what you think—about me livin' as long as them. But I won't. Nussir. I'm liable to drop in me tracks any minute. It's in here—in me heart. Me father went that way—an' me mother, an' me brother Dan. 'Tis a good way to go. It beats layin' around on a bed an' dyin' fer a month, er mebbe a year, like some does."

"You're right," Black John agreed. "But about leavin' the Tuttles this location—you've never recorded it. If you should drop off sudden, there's nothin' to prevent the first man that can get to Dawson from recordin' it—me, for instance, or any of the boys on Halfaday."

The oldster's face drew into a frown. "Mebbe by this time Gus has soaked long enough to git so water logged he can't pop up. Anyways I'm going to take a chanct an' record it. But I ain't in no shape to make the trip to Dawson."

"We can fix that part, all right. Cush is what's known as a Free Miner's recorder. You can record your location with him an' he'll record it within a reasonable time with the regular recorder. It's a perfectly legal procedure, where a claim lays more than a hundred miles from the nearest recordin' office. Cush an' I are hittin' for Dawson tomorrow. He can record it as soon as we get there. That will put the location on record in your name, but that won't give title to it to the Tuttles when you drop off. It'll go through the hands of the public administrator, and if he can't locate any legal heirs it will revert to the Crown."

"Well what a hell of a way to do!" the old man cried angrily. "Jest because somewan ain't got a lot of relations to fight over his property when he dies, the Crown grabs

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it— an' I s'pose the King of England would be over here diggin' in it the minute he hears I'm dead!"

Black John laughed. "We can keep the King out of here, easy enough. All you got to do is make out an assignment transferrin' all right, title an' interest in this property to the Tuttles. An' I'll record the assignment, after Cush records the location. Of course, that would give the Tuttles immediate ownership of the location, but I don't believe you need to worry about that. They wouldn't know that the transfer had been made, an' even if they did, they would not kick you off the property an' take over."

"Hell, no! I'd trust them two, with anything I've got."

"How about me? How do you know I won't record that assignment to myself instead of the Tuttles?"

There was a twinkle in the old man's eye as he replied. "The sourdoughs all claim ye're an outlaw, John. An' from what I've heard, if I was a crook er a dredge company, I wouldn't trust ye over the first ridge. But ye ain't the kind of an outlaw that would beat an old man, nor yet a couple of young folks out of a claim, be a damn sight!"

III

ONE DAY, not long after Black John and Cush had returned to Halfaday from a trip to Dawson, during which they had duly recorded old Pat Finnigan's location, and also the assignment of the claim to Joe and Ada Tuttle, Joe barged into the saloon where Black John and Cush were shaking a game of dice for the drinks. "Old Pat's sick as hell," he announced, "an' I'm headin' for Dawson to fetch Doc Sutherland."

"What ails him?" Cush asked.

"It's in his belly. Ada went over there last evening to take him a blueberry pie she'd made, and found him lying in his bunk in terrible misery. He claimed his belly was so sore he couldn't hardly stand the touch of the blanket. Ada took a look and she says it's all swollen up and kind of red looking, and she thinks he's running a hell of a fever because his forehead is hot, and his eyes are kind of bright and funny looking, and he seems sort of out of his head. She set the water pail where he could reach it, and came over and told me, an' then she went back to Finnigan's."

"Sounds like a ruptured appendix to me," Black John said. "If it is you couldn't get Doc here in time to do any good. The old man would be dead of peritonitis before you could get to Dawson."

"Well, I can try!" Joe cried. "I can't just sit around and see the old fellow die without doing something to help him."

"That's right," Cush agreed. "Chances is, if it's only his guts, a couple of damn good drinks of licker'll fetch him around. I'll send One Armed John over with a quart soon's he shows up."

Joe shook his head. "I'm afraid old Pat's number's up. Ada said he was rattling off as fast as he can talk—now about one thing—and almost in the same breath about another. She says he told her he wanted us to work the claim for all it's worth. He claimed there might be a million in it, but first we'd have to tap that little lake back on the ridge and pipe water to it. But hell—we haven't recorded the location, yet. We're just sort of prospecting it—sinking a shaft on our crick, right opposite Pat's in hope that the pocket he struck reaches under the ridge into our crick. Funny he'd say that—about the claim might be worth a million—because before he'd always told us he figured we're wasting our time on that location—said he didn't think we'd ever hit it lucky there."

Black John eyed the younger man. "This time he was talkin' about his claim," he said.

"His claim! How could we work his claim? That's a mighty good claim of old Pat's. I wonder who will get that claim, if he should die?"

"You will," the big man replied. "You an' Ada."

"What?" cried the astounded man.

"That's right. His claim is duly recorded and assigned to you an' Ada. He done it in appreciation of what you two have done for him."

"Cripes!" Joe exclaimed. "What little we ever did for the old man isn't worth mentioning!"

Black John smiled. "That ain't the way Pat Finnigan figured it. The assignment says the location was granted in return for value received. Sometimes the little things

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a man does count up mighty big in the long run."

"Anyhow, old Pat is still alive, and I'm hitting hell-bent for Dawson to get the doctor," the younger man said, and tossed an empty packsack to Cush. "Throw what grub I'll need for the trip in there and I'll be on my way."

BLACK JOHN glanced at Cush. "Yeah —throw the grub in the pack," he said, and as Cush stepped into the storeroom, he turned to the other. "I'll make the trip to Dawson, son," he said. "If old Pat is as sick as I think he is from what you told me, he'll be dead long before I get there. But I'll do my damndest. I know a short-cut that'll get me there a good three days quicker than you could make it. You go back an' help Ada take care of him. If Pat should kick out, you hit for Dawson so's to head Doc off. No use in him makin' the trip for nothin'."

"That's mighty white of you. I sure hate to bother you—but it would be kind of hard for Ada—there alone with him."

"Who the hell's botherin' me! I'd go as far as you would to help the old man! An' besides," he added, with a wink, "it might be I could make some slight profit on the trip if I can find a stud game. I feel a streak of luck comin' on."

The other smiled. "I guess you've helped a lot of folks, from what I hear."

The big man returned the smile. "Yeah —helped some—an' hindered others. It's accordin' to the way things shape up."

"I sure hope old Pat pulls through," Joe said. "But in case he don't make the grade —gee! With a claim like that Ada and I could do all the things we've planned to do if we ever made a strike. I'd planned to study medicine. And Ada—just think of it—poor kid, she's lived here in the Yukon all her life. Back there, living in the city, she could have things she never even dreamed of! And believe me, she's earned everything she'll ever get! She's worked hard, and she's never lost faith. But about piping the water down from that lake? Old Pat always claimed that if he'd tap that lake for water he could clean up a million in a short time. He measured off the distance he'd have to pipe it, and the last time I went down to Dawson, he had me find out about what the cost of the pipe and labor would be. Sorenson, at the A.C. Co. figured out it would run right around a hundred, or a hundred and ten thousand dollars. That seems like a lot of money, but do you know, while Sorenson was figuring on it, Mr. Petticord happened to come in.

"He glanced at the figures, and told me to tell Pat that when he got ready to put in the pipe, he would lend him the money to finance the deal cheaper than the bank would. He said he'd heard enough about old Pat's claim from the sourdoughs, so he'd advance the money without bothering to look the location over. He said he understood that the location hadn't been recorded, but he guessed no one would dare to jump it, lying as close to Halfaday Crick as it does—and old Pat being a friend of yours. He said, though, that Pat would have to record it before he'd loan any money on it. Then he'd take a mortgage on the claim for the amount of the loan. So if old Pat shouldn't pull through, now that the location and the assignment are recorded, I can go to Mr. Petticord and get the money. If the assignment is made out to Ada and me both, she'd have to sign the mortgage, too. So if old Pat does die, she better come along with me, when we hit down to head off the doctor."

Black John reached for the bottle and poured a drink. "H-u-u-m," he said, when the other had finished. "Petticord, eh? I presume you refer to Amos D. Petticord, attorney-at-law, dealer in minin' properties, an' loaner of money?"

"Yes, he's the one. He said he'd advance the money cheaper than the bank would."

THE big man nodded slowly. "Y-e-a-h. Yeah—I s'pose he would, at that. You know, son, I was just standin' here thinkin'. You an' Ada have got faith in that location you're workin'—there where your cabin's at, ain't you?"

"Sure we have. But I don't expect it'll ever be anything like old Pat's claim."

"Prob'ly not. But you've done quite a bit of work on it, ain't you?"

"Yes, we've sunk a couple of shafts trying to find out if that pocket of Pat's stretched through under the ridge."

"Well then, if I was you, I'd record that

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location when you an' Ada get down to Dawson."

"Record it! But—why should we record it? That is, if—if old Pat shouldn't pull through?"

"Lots of folks owns more than one claim. But in case old Pat should kick out, I was thinkin' it would be a right nice gesture on your part to record that location, an' name the crick Finnigan's Crick—after old Pat. It would sort of—of keep his name alive—after he's gone."

"But—his crick is Finnigan's Crick!"

Black John shook his head. "Only in the vernacular, as you might say. It's true that it's known hereabouts as Finnigan's Crick, an' in recordin' it Cush used the popular name of Finnigan's Crick—an' that's the way it stands on the grant. But Pat named his crick Luck Crick, an' that's the way he wanted it. So you see, if you don't name your crick after old Pat and restore the name of Lucky Crick to the one he lives on, the poor old man's wish would be frustrated. If you do as I suggest then his crick will be left as he named it. And at the same time his name will not be lost to posterity."

"Huh," grunted Cush, who had just returned with the pack of supplies, "it wouldn't of be'n lost to prosperity if Pat would of worked it harder! "

The big man ignored the interruption. "Yes sir," he continued, "I believe old Pat would appreciate that—if he could know."

"By God, I'll do it!" Joe exclaimed. "And not only that, I'll get me a couple of nice boards and burn the name, FINNIGAN'S CRICK and LUCKY CRICK into 'em, and set up a post at the mouth of each crick where they empty into Halfaday so everyone that goes along can see 'em. You know, the mouths are only a few yards apart."

"A damn good idea," Black John agreed. "Well—here's my trail outfit—so I'll be hittin' for Dawson. In case Pat kicks out, you an' Ada hit out for Dawson as soon as you can, so Doc won't be travellin' no farther than he has to."

As Joe turned toward the door, Cush called him back. "Here—take this licker along. Wait, I better make it two quarts. Like I says—if it ain't nothin' but his guts that ailin' him, chances is the licker'll fix him up—an' John'll have his trip fer nothin'—onlest, mebbe, he gits lucky in a stud game."

IV

ARRIVING in Dawson, Black John proceeded directly to the hospital where Dr. Sutherland greeted him with a smile. "Hello, John. What's the good news from Halfaday Crick?"

The big man returned the smile. "If a man depended on Halfaday for his good news he'd be in a hell of a fix. The kind of riff-aff that persists in showin' up amongst us, the best news a man could hear would be if one of 'em got hung. The fact is, I'm afraid I've got bad news for you. Joe Tuttle showed up at Cush's the other day on his way down to get you to go up an' doctor old Pat Finnigan."

"What's the matter with Pat, now? I heard he broke his leg a while back."

"Yeah, but it wasn't a bad break, an' I set it for him. He's walkin' around on it, but accordin' to Joe, this is worse. He says Ada went over to Pat's to take him a pie she made an' found him layin' in his bunk with his belly all swelled up an' sort of red lookin' an' hurtin' so bad he could hardly stand the blanket touchin' it. She says he's runnin' a hell of a fever. I sent Joe back to help Ada look after him an' I come on down to get you. To tell the truth, it looks to me like a swell case of peritonitis, prob'ly followin' a ruptured appendix."

The doctor's smile widened. "I don't know why you came clear down here to bother me with it. You seem to be a pretty good medico yourself—you set his leg and got away with it, and according to the symptoms, I believe your diagnosis of his present ailment is correct."

"Oh, shore, the diagnosis is prob'ly okay. But onfortunately a diagnosis ain't worth a damn to Pat. It's proper medical treatment he wants—not diagnosis."

"Guess that's right, but with the symptoms as you described them, it's my guess that old Pat's dead by this time. Probably been dead for several days. However, I'll hit for Halfaday on the bare chance he might still be alive."

"You prob'ly won't get very far," Black John said. "I figured it about like you do—that Pat wouldn't last long, the fix he's in. So I told Joe to hit for Dawson as quick as Pat died, so's to head you off. I wouldn't be surprised if you'd meet him on the river

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before you hit the mouth of the White. No use in you makin' a run clean up there for nothin'."

"Good for you. You going back with me?"

"No, now I'm down here I figure it's my duty to instruct a bunch of them onregenerate sourdoughs in some of the finer p'ints of stud. An' on top of that I figure I might be of some slight service to Joe an' Ada Tuttle in financin' a deal for some pipe. They live on the next crick to old Pat, an' they've be'n might good to him, so a while back, unbeknownst to them, Pat recorded his location, an' then assigned it to them. So if he's dead, they'll be takin' over. An' they won't be satisfied with workin' that claim by the panful, like Pat done. By pipin' water down from a little lake in the hills they can prob'ly clean out that pocket in a year or two. Joe, he'd like to clean up as soon as he can, so he can go down to the States an' study medicine."

The doctor nodded. "Yes, he's talked to me about it—he and Ada both. Joe's a hard worker, and I believe he'll make good. They say they want to come back up here and practice. We could use a few more physicians here in the North—men who savvy the country. I'm glad to know that he can probably finance his education. They say old Pat has a good claim."

"Best one around there. Well, so long, Doc. I'll be slippin' down to the Tivoli."

"So long, John. Before you get in that stud game hunt up Bill Atlee and tell him to throw enough grub in his canoe for a trip to Halfaday, and stop here for me. Bill's a damn good hand with a canoe."

AFTER arranging with Atlee for the doctor's transportation, Black John sauntered into the Tivoli Saloon to find Amos D. Petticord standing before the bar, a bottle and glass before him. The attorney greeted him cordially. "Why, hello, John, old top! Haven't seen you in quite a while. What are you going to have?"

"Well, along about this time of day, a little touch of liquor mightn't come amiss. How you doin'? Or," the big man added, with a grin, "to express it more aptly, as a professor would say—who you doin'?"

The other returned the grin with a wink. "Birds of a feather flock together, they say. Anyhow, they understand each other, eh?"

"Perfectly."

"By the way, this meeting with you is a rather fortunate coincidence. You know young Joe Tuttle, don't you?"

"Yeah, I know him."

"Well, I happened to be talking to the recorder in here the other day, and he told me that old Pat Finnegan had finally recorded his location up there in your country, and has assigned it to Tuttle and his wife. Know anything about it?"

"Yes, I was with Cush when he recorded the location, an' I recorded the assignment for Pat. It's all on the books. Why?"

"Throw that one into you," the other replied, "an' bring your glass along. We'll go over here to a table where we can have a talk."

Picking up his own glass and the bottle from the bar, Petticord led the way to a table at the far side of the room. "I've got a hunch," he said, when they had seated themselves, "that you and I can make medicine." He filled the two glasses from the bottle, and leaned closer. "How'd you like a cut on a damn juicy proposition?" he asked.

Black John considered. "How much of a cut on what kind of a proposition?" he asked.

"It's all open and aboveboard, and perfectly legal."

"Kind of out of your line, ain't it?" the big man remarked with a grin.

Petticord returned the grin. "Yours too—if you want to put it that way. The fact is, we've both operated pretty extensively in our own particlar lines, and have always managed to keep clear on the law."

"Oh, shore. But you ain't answered my question."

"It's like this—I've got to put up a hundred thousand in cold cash—but you don't put up a cent."

"Sounds reasonable, so far," Black John admitted.

"On the other hand, you've got some information I need—and your word is law on Halfaday and vicinity. If it became known that you were interested in an enterprise up there, it would insure the success of the undertaking. That is, in case we obtained title to a rich location in your neighborhood, the fact that you were in on it would render it

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safe from any inroads or depredations from your gang of outlaws, wouldn't it?"

Black John nodded. "Yes, I could prob'ly guarantee that such proposition would be onmolested."

"Okay. That's where you git in—that and the fact that you undoubtedly have some information I need before investing a hundred thousand dollars in the venture. What do you say to a fifty-fifty arrangement?"

"Sounds reasonable. Let's hear the rest of it."

"In the first place the talk around here among the sourdoughs is that old Pat Finnigan struck it lucky on a crick that runs into Halfaday. They say that Pat, for reasons of his own, refused to record his location, but that no one would dare to jump it for the reason that you have given the word that it wouldn't be exactly healthy for anyone to attempt it. Is that right?"

Black John nodded. "Yes, that seems to be a fairly accurate summin' up of the case, as you lawyers would say."

"So far, so good. Now, in your honest opinion, is this location worth what the sourdoughs seem to think it is?"

"Yup. Maybe a damn sight more. It's one of them lucky strikes—a pocket where the dust got caught behind a transverse rock dike in a bend of an old crick."

"And you corroborate the recorder's statement that the Finnigan location has been recorded, and that an assignment from Finnigan to the Tuttles has also been recorded? Of course, I could verify the facts by going over the records—but your word on top of the recorder's is good enough for me."

"The recordin's were made, all right. You don't need to worry about that."

"Do you recollect what consideration was mentioned in the assignment?"

"Yup—one dollar, an' 'an old man's appreciation of many acts of kindness,' is the way he wrote it out. You see, Joe an' Ada lived on a location of their own on another crick just acrost a ridge from Finnigan's claim. Seems to me they named it Lucky Crick, on account of them havin' faith that they'd make a strike there. But up to now they haven't taken out much more'n wages. They always befriended old Pat anyway they could. An' naturally, old Pat appreciated it. To show his appreciation, he transferred the location to 'em—with, of course, the onderstanin' that they won't take it over till old Pat's dead."

Petticord's eyes widened. "Do you mean," he cried, "that the Tuttles don't get possession till Finnigan's death?"

"Yup."

"Was that stipulation stated in the assignment?"

"Nope. It didn't need to be. Finnigan knew them two would never shove him off his claim."

"But legally there's nothing to prevent them from doing just that," Petticord said.

"Prob'ly not—legally," Black John admitted. "But morally there's plenty to prevent it. You might not know it, Petticord—but there's times an' situations when a moral concept makes a damn fool out of the law."

The other frowned. "What the hell are you—a preacher?"

"Not so reputed, I believe."

The other cleared his throat. "Ahem, I'm wondering whether an—er—an appropriate consideration wouldn't induce the Tuttles to oust Finnigan, and take over the claim under their legal rights?"

"Nope."

AFTER several moments of silence, during which Petticord toyed with his glass, his brow wrinkled in thought, Black John broke the silence. "You might as well forget what you're thinkin' about, Petticord. Murderin' Finnigan to get shet of him wouldn't get you nothin' but a hangin' on Halfaday."

The other glanced up sharply. "What do you mean?" he asked.

"You know damn well what I mean. It didn't take no mind reader to follow your line of thought. But as a matter of fact, I don't think we've got to worry much about the Tuttles takin' immediate possession of that location. Old Pat was damn near dead when I started down after the doctor, ten days ago."

Hardly were the words out of his mouth before the door opened and Dr. Sutherland stepped into the room, dressed for the trail. Glancing about, he stepped to the table and paused. "I didn't have to go very far, John," he announced. "Bill and I met the Tuttles just as we were shoving off in the

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canoe. They said old Pat died the day after you left Halfaday. They're over at the hotel, now."

As the doctor left, Petticord's face fairly beamed. "Now that's what I call luck! It seems, John, that fate is playing straight into our hands. Finnigan's dead—and the Tuttles are right here in Dawson. We can get this thing cleaned up in no time. Now, according to what young Tuttle himself told me a while back, there's a lake not far back in the hills from which water could be piped to the Finnigan claim, thus permitting operation on a large scale. Is that right?"

"That's right. Old Pat could have piped that water down for about a hundred thousan,' an be one of the biggest operators in the Yukon. But as long as he was gettin' out enough dust for expenses, he wasn't interested."

"Okay—now here's where we come in. Joe Tuttle is going to pipe that water down. That is, he thinks he is. As a matter of fact, you and I will do the piping— and we'll rake the profit, too. You see, when he was down here a while back, old Pat had him find out how much it would take to pipe that water to his claim. I happened in while Sorenson was figuring it out, and I told Tuttle to tell Finnigan that I'd loan him the money cheaper than the bank would—so now that Tuttle has the claim, he'll certainly come to me for the money to finance the deal. Why, he told me then that if it was his claim he wouldn't lose any time in getting in that pipe line. Here's the way we'll work it—I'll advance the money, and take a mortgage due in six months on the claim. Tuttle will buy the pipe and start it for the claim. If it should so happen that delivery on part of it should be delayed until such time as Tuttle could not possibly get his operation going in time to meet the mortgage payment, then I will foreclose on the claim, we'll move the delayed pipe on up, and start getting out our million. How does that sound?"

"Sounds like a damn good swindle—one it would take a lawyer to think up, an' a damned crooked one, too. You hire a crew of freighters an' I'll put a man in charge of the job. The White is a damn tricky river, an' if a man that knows it was bossin' the job we could be sure of havin' the pipe right where we wanted it—when we wanted it. Red John knows every inch of the river—an' he'd do as I say."

The other smiled. "Okay. Then you'll go in on it?"

"Oh, shore. I ain't no hand to pass up the chanct to make a profit. But just as a matter of precaution, Petticord, you better draw up a memorandum of agreement, statin' that you an' me are equal pardners in Finnigan's location."

"All right. Come on over to my office, and I'll make out the note and the mortgage, and draw up the agreement which we can both sign." In his office the man busied himself at a typewriter. He looked up. "The name of this crick the claim is on is Finnigan's Crick, isn't it?"

"That's right. It's known as Finnigan's Crick."

"And now as to the location of this crick —about where does it flow into Halfaday Crick?"

"About six miles, more or less, above where Halfaday runs into the White."

"And about how far up Finnigan's Crick is the claim located?"

"About five miles. That's the way it's recorded."

WHEN the man finished, he handed the note and mortgage to Black John. "It just occurred to me that it would be best if you take these documents over to the hotel and get the signatures of the Tuttles. You see, when Tuttle was down here, he happened to mention that he was a friend of yours. He said that you had advised old man Finnigan to put in that pipe line, and that he has a lot of respect for your judgment. I believe that knowing you still approved of the deal would cinch getting his signature on the dotted line. Have them both sign the mortgage and the note, too. As I said—he's got confidence in your judgment."

"Yeah, quite a lot of folks has—one way an' another. All right, I'll slip over to the hotel. Joe'll prob'ly come back with me, an' in the meantime you better get the money an' have it here to turn over to him."

In the hotel Black John accosted the Tuttles, who sadly informed him of Finnigan's death. "Yeah," the big man replied, "Doc Sutherland stopped in to the Tivoli

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an' told me about it. By the way, Petticord was in there, too, an' when he heard about Pat's death, he told me about his offer to loan Finnigan the money for the pipe line when you were down here that time. He said the offer held for you, too, if you wanted to take it up. I told him I was certain you would, as I judge it to be a sound investment. So he went ahead an' made out these papers, for you an' Ada to sign. I told him I'd take 'em over an' get your signatures, an' then Joe can go back with me to Petticord's office, an' get the cash, without no delay at all."

"Why—thank you, John. We sure do appreciate that. Let's see, where do we sign?"

The big man selected one of the papers. "This here's the note—it calls for a hundred thousan' dollars, an' runs for six months. Just you an' Ada sign there on them two lines. An' this here's thet mortgage as security for the note. You can both sign it, too—there on the lines."

"Gee," Joe said, as he handed back the signed paper, "I never thought I'd some day be signing a note for a hundred thousand! It makes me feel like I'm in big business." Picking up the other paper, he scanned it. "It says here that the claim is located on Finnigan's Crick. Don't you remember—old Pat named his crick Lucky Crick?"

Black John nodded. "That's so—but did you ever hear anyone but him call it Lucky Crick? You did not. Everyone else calls it Finnigan's Crick. That's what it's known as—an' that's the way the mortgage reads. So go ahead an' sign it."

"But I named my crick Finnigan's Crick. You suggested my doing that, so old Pat's name would be remembered. I even made those signboards like I promised with the names burned in, and nailed 'em on posts at the mouths of both the cricks—where they flow into Halfaday only a few yards apart."

"Oh, shore—but don't quibble! Cripes, if folks persists in callin' both of them cricks Finnigan's crick old Pat's name'll be remembered twict as long. Anyhow, Petticord'll find out which one is Finnigan's Crick when he gets up there—you don't need to worry about that. All you got to do is sign up, an' come on over with me an' get your money. An' don't go shootin' off your mouth to Petticord about the names of them cricks, or he might think you're tryin' to put somethin' over on him. Them lawyers is suspicious folks, at best. A lot of deals has be'n fouled up by too much talk. The way it is, you'll have the money—that's what you want. An' Petticord'll have the note an' mortgage—that's what he wants. So everything is all Jake. An' by the way, you don't need to bother about findin' a crew to freight in that pipe. Petticord will 'tend to that for you. He knows the ropes. He can get it done a damn sight cheaper than you could. An' I'll see to it that you can pick up a crew on Halfaday to lay the pipe as it comes in. Come on—let's go."

Accompanying Black John to Petticord's office, Joe turned over the note and mortgage, and received one hundred thousand dollar bills. The lawyer smiled as he counted out the money. "There you are, Tuttle. Allow me to congratulate you on your good-fortune. It isn't every young man your age that steps right into the middle of a million-dollar proposition. My advice to you is to purchase your pipe at once and have it loaded on the *Hannah*. I understand she is due to pull out tomorrow morning for up-river.

"I will hustle around and procure a crew of freighters and a couple of scows for the trip up the White and have them on the boat. That will undoubtedly prove a tough job of freighting which will necessitate several trips. My friend, Black John, assured me that you can obtain the necessary labor on Halfaday Crick for laying the pipe and building your sluice. If I were you I'd lose no time, but start laying your pipe as soon as the first load arrives on your claim. And I may say here that you are mighty lucky to have a friend like Black John so close at hand. Isn't that so, John?"

"I'll say he is," the big man replied. "Yes sir—mighty lucky."

V

TAKING passage on the *Hannah*, Black John and the Tuttles disembarked with their canoes at the mouth of the White River and watched the pipe unloaded from the steamboat. As the first two scowloads headed up the smaller river Black John assured the freighters that he would have a man who was thoroughly familiar with the river meet them at Fish Rapids and take

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charge from there on. The three then proceeded upriver in the canoes.

Arriving at Cushing's Fort, Black John bid good-bye to the Tuttles who proceeded to their own claim. "It'll be two, three weeks before them first two loads of pipe get here," he said, "what with portagin' it around rapids, an' a lot of track-linin' on the fast water stretches. An' in the meantime I'll rustle a crew here on Halfaday that'll start layin' the pipe as soon as it gets here."

"That's fine, John," Joe Tuttle said. "We sure appreciate what you've done for us—and sometime we hope to be able to pay you back. The first thing we're going to do when we get back home will be to tear down that shack of old Pat's and get out the logs for a decent cabin on the claim."

Black John nodded approval. "Yeah, that's a good idea. If you get out your logs before the pipe gets here, the chances is that the boys can help you roll up the cabin, odd times—like while they're waitin' for the next load to come in."

As Black John had predicted, nearly three weeks elapsed before the first two loads of pipe arrived at its destination. A dozen men from Halfaday packed the pipe to the little lake, and proceeded to lay it in place. Then snow came, and a month later the second consignment arrived, hauled in by dog teams recruited from Halfaday. But it was near the end of December before another lot showed up. In the meantime, the men of Halfaday had not only completed the cabin on the Finnigan claim, but had also rolled up a log bunkhouse of ample proportion of their own housing.

LATE in January Joe Tuttle stepped into Cushing's saloon one day as Black John and Cush were shaking dice for the drinks. Cush spun an extra glass toward him as he reached the bar. "Drink up," he invited. "This un's on the house."

Tuttle poured his drink and glanced into Black John's eyes. "I'm worried," he announced. "Damn good and worried."

The big man smiled. "What in the devil has a young fella with a million-dollar proposition on his hands got to worry about?" he asked.

"As slow as that pipe is coming in, I'm not even going to get it laid before my six months is up—let alone get out a hundred thousand dollars worth of dust to pay off that mortgage. It's due next month. I've got to go down to Dawson and ask Petticord for an extension."

The big man shook his head. "You can save yourself the trip, son. You won't get no extension on that mortgage. Petticord don't give extensions. He's a man who demands his pound of flesh, accordin' to the strict construction of the law."

Young Tuttle's face went white. "But—but good Lord, John—that claim is good for that hundred thousand ten times over! He couldn't lose any money by granting an extension."

"The way he figures it, he couldn't lose any money by takin' over the claim, either."

"You mean—he'd actually take the claim over, without giving me a chance to redeem it! Why, man, if that pipe had been delivered within a reasonable time, it would have been in place before this, and I'd have had gold enough sluiced out to pay off the mortgage."

"That's right. That's what Petticord was afraid of. That's why he seen to it that the pipe wasn't delivered on time."

"You mean that he knew the pipe wouldn't get there on time? That he actually planned to have it delayed, so he could foreclose on the property?"

"Shore he did. Them freighters was hand-picked—an' Petticord picked 'em."

"Then it's fraud, or something! By God, I'll fight him in the courts!"

"How you goin' to prove it? Them freighters ain't goin' to squawk—an' shore as hell Petticord ain't. Trouble with goin' into court is, the Law demands evidence—an' you ain't got none."

"But—you know it's a fraud—you just told me so. You could testify."

Black John grinned. "I'm only guessin'. An' accordin' to law, a guess ain't evidence. Take a miners' meetin', now—an' if a good guess would serve the ends of justice, we admit it, same as any other evidence. But the law demands facts, an if there ain't no facts available, justice is left hangin' in mid-air. By the way, Joe—you moved over in your new cabin, yet, there on Finnigan's claim?"

The other shook his head dully. "No," he answered, "it's all finished and ready—

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but now I guess we won't ever move into it. My God, John, this will just about kill Ada! Poor kid—she's counted on being able at last to do the things we'd planned to do. I was going to study medicine and then we'd figured on coming back to the Yukon and practice. But I guess now we can forget all that."

Behind the bar Cush scowled. "It's a dam' shame!" he cried. "Believe me, if that damn cuss shows up here when he comes up to take over yer claim, I'm goin' to bust him one right between the eyes with a bung starter! An' how about you, John? Yer allus outfiggerin' them damn crooks one way er another. Be you goin' to stand around an' see them young folks beat out of their claim?"

THE big man cleared his throat. "Petticord is ondoubtless actin' within his legal rights. Who am I to interfere?"

He turned to Tuttle. "About movin' into your new cabin on Lucky Crick, there's no need to be in any hurry to. The way things is shaped up, I'm bettin' that Petticord will be showin' up to take over his property in accordance with a strict construction of the law on the day that mortgage falls due. He'll prob'ly stop in here on his way up there, an' I'll go along to Finnigan's Crick with him—just to see that everything's legal. We don't stand fer no skullduggery on Halfaday an' vicinity." He paused and glanced into the irate eyes of old Cush. "An' when he does show up, you lay off him, see! Pastin' a man between the eyes with a bung starter is not only crude an' onmannerly, but it rarely serves the ends of justice."

VI

TRUE to Black John's prediction, Petticord, accompanied by a husky individual, stepped into Cushing's saloon late in the afternoon of the day before the mortgage fell due. The two approached the bar where Black John stood facing Cush, a bottle, glasses, and the inevitable leather dice box between them. Petticord greeted the big man jovially. "Well, John, it looks like tomorrow is our lucky day! Meet Pete Jarvis. Pete's a prospector who happens to be down on his luck at present, so I hired him to make the trip with me. He's a good hand with a canoe, and he understands panning out gold. They say you can shovel gold right out of the grass roots anywhere on that claim, and I thought I'd have Pete make a few test pannings, here and there. It might give us an idea of exactly where to start to work the claim systematically. And besides, that," he added, with a wink, "he's good and stalwart, Pete is, and I figured he might come in handy if the—er—present incumbent should kick up a fuss about turning over the property."

"Oh, I don't believe Joe'll resort to no violence. He knows the time's up on the mortgage, an' he knows there ain't nothin' he can do about it, in case you won't grant him an extension."

"Fat chance he's got for an extension," Petticord grinned. "All the extension he'll get is just time enough to grab up his personal belongings, and get off the claim."

"Yeah—he was in here the other day, an' I told him I didn't figure you'd grant an extension. But hell, I forgot—Petticord, meet Lyme Cushing. Cush, he's the proprietor of this emporium of good cheer. Cush meet Amos D. Petticord, attorney-at-law, an' his side-kick, Pete Jarvis."

Cush acknowledged the introduction with a surly grunt. "Drink up," he invited sourly as he slid a couple of glasses across the bar, "this un's on the house."

When the glasses were emptied Petticord tossed a bill onto the bar. "We'll fill 'em up again," he said. "I've heard of you, Mr. Cushing. In the future I expect to be spending considerable time hereabouts. I trust that we will become better acquainted."

"Huh. Well, tellin' you about me, Pettyfog, I wouldn't give a damn if I never seen you agin. I don't like lawyers of no kind—an' a crooked one worst of all."

Petticord frowned. "What do you mean—crooked? What is crooked about foreclosing a mortgage when it falls due? Any judge and jury in the world would uphold me in this foreclosure."

"Huh—a jedge ain't nothin' but a glorified lawyer. Gittin' app'inted jedge can't change his nature none. You can't cure a skunk of stinkin' by tyin' a ribbon around his neck. An' as fer a jury—the kind of folks they pick to set on one, they'd uphold anything the jedge tells 'em to."

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"But I tell you this is a perfectly legal procedure," Petticord insisted.

"Oh, shore. Lawyers robs folks legal, an' outlaws robs 'em onlegal—but it's the same difference in the long run."

THE attorney turned to Black John. "I certainly did not expect to encounter a hostile attitude here on Halfaday," he said. "But at least we can ignore it. Now as to the pipe, I assume that your crew has already laid the consignments that have been delivered?"

Black Jack nodded. "Yeah, it's all in place from the lake almost to the claim. The boys built 'em a bunkhouse up there an' they're hangin' around waitin' for the rest of the pipe to show up."

"Good. And now if I can arrange for accommodations for the night, I think I'll rest up. Unaccustomed as I am to physical exertion, the trip was very fatiguing. It's upstream all the way."

"Oh, shore, but goin' back will be downstream, an' I'm bettin' you'll go hell a-whoopin'. You can camp tonight in One Eyed John's cabin. It's only a little ways."

"But this One Eye John—won't he object?"

"Nope. He ain't objected to nothin' since we hung him, a while back. He did object to that—but it didn't do him no good."

"I've heard how you hang men, up here. What was this One Eyed John's offense?"

"Oh, he was a damn crook. Tried to beat a young feller out of his claim, so we called a miners' meetin' an' hung him. Come on, fetch your packsacks, an' we'll be gettin' over there."

"At least," Petticord said, as the packs were deposited on the floor of One Eyed John's cabin, "tomorrow's trip will not be very long. I noted a signboard indicating Finnigan's Creek a short distance below here as we came up. Also another board indicating Lucky Creek. The two creeks empty into Halfaday only a short distance apart."

Black John nodded. "Yeah, the two valleys run parallel with only a ridge between 'em. Joe an' Ada Tuttle has be'n livin' in the shack on Finnigan's Crick. When they get ousted out of there, they can move over onto Lucky Crick. They built a good cabin over there—so it won't be as if they didn't have a place to go."

Petticord shrugged. "I don't give a damn where they go when they leave Finnigan's Creek. They could hole up in a tent, for all I care."

Black John turned toward the door. "Well, you boys make yourselves comfortable. I'll stop by for you early in the mornin'."

Returning to the saloon, Black John met Cush's glowering gaze as he advanced to the bar. "What the hell?" he demanded. "That there damn Pettyfog talked like you an' him was in cahoots, robbin' Joe Tuttle out of his claim!"

The big man nodded, and picking up the bottle, filled the glass Cush slid toward him. "Oh, shore. Like I told him down in the Tivoli when he offered to let me in on it, I ain't no hand to pass up a good proposition."

The words fairly exploded from Cush's lips. "Well, of all the damn, dirty, lousy——" He broke off suddenly, his shrewd eyes fixed on the dead-pan face of the other. "Listen, John," he said, "if I thought you was mixed up in beatin' them two young folks outa their location, by God, I'd bust you one right between the eyes with the bung starter. But you ain't. I know you too well fer that, so I'm takin' back them names I called you 'fore I stopped to think. I git it now. I'd ort to know'd you wouldn't do nothin' onderhanded. So it's Pettyfog yer aimin' to rob, an' not Joe an' Ada! Well, good luck, John! I'd ort to stumbled to it when you told him you'd bet he'd go back hell a-whoopin'. But hey—hold on. If he's tryin' to rob them two, why the hell don't we hang the guy? I seen a kinda funny look come in his eyes when you told him we hung One Eyed John fer tryin' to beat some young fella outa his claim. Why not go ahead an' hang him? Cripes, Finnigan's Crick is a damn sight more contigulous an' subterderin' than a lot of cricks we've hung men fer committin' crimes on! An' besides, we ain't had no hangin' in quite a while. The boys would enjoy one."

Black John shook his head with a grin. "No. It wouldn't be ethical. Much as Petticord needs hangin' I wouldn't feel justified in carryin' out such sentence in this instance. You see, in a manner of speaking, I was instrumental in his comin' here. I smelt a nigger in the woodpile the minute Joe Tuttle

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mentioned right here in this room that Petticord had offered to lend the money for the development of Finnigan's claim cheaper than the bank would. So when I got to Dawson an' Petticord broached his plan an' offered to let me in on it fifty-fifty, I took him up. The way things is—Joe an' Ada get their pipe at half price. I get fifty thousan' out of it—an' Petticord is left holdin' the bag. What I claim, any right-minded citizen should go to any length to teach these damn crooks that crime don't pay."

Cush nodded somberly. "Yeah—special when them right-minded citizens kin make a damn good killin' teachin' 'em. But at that, John—I wisht I was smart, like you. Seems like I can't never figger them things out—till after you tell me how you worked it. Then it seems easy as hell."

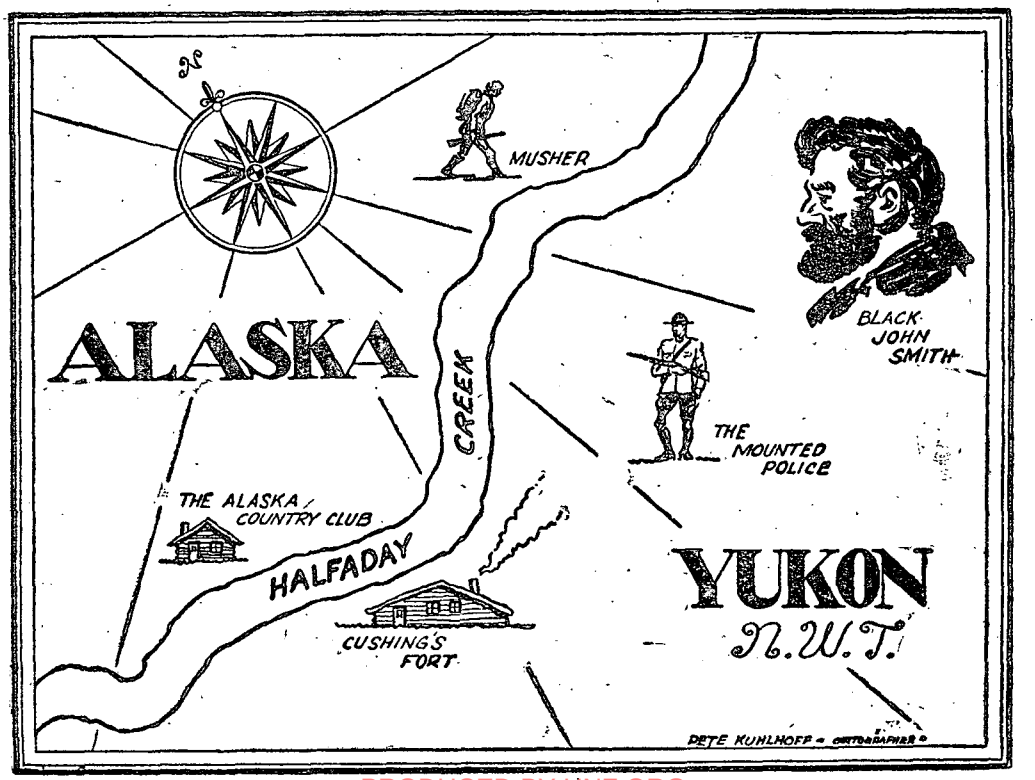
VII

BRIGHT and early the following morning Petticord showed up at the Tuttle cabin accompanied by Black John and Pete Jarvis. As the two occupants stepped from the cabin, he greeted them with a smile. "Well, folks, I guess you know why I'm here. Time's up on that mortgage, and I'm here to take over the property."

"Listen, Mr. Petticord," Joe said, "won't you extend that mortgage for another six months?"

"Can't do it, young man. A mortgage is a contract and must be carried out to the letter. By its terms I contracted to turn over to you the sum of one hundred thousand dollars, the amount to be returned to me, together with the accrued interest, at the end of a six-month period. In the event of your failure to return this money when due, I was to take over the property. I performed my part of the contract when I turned the money over to you. I therefore demand that you fulfill your part of it according to the letter of its terms. Either hand over right here and now the one hundred thousand dollars plus the accrued interest, or its equivalent in gold, or give me immediate possession of the property."

All the color had drained from Ada Tuttle's face and her voice faltered as she implored the man. "Oh, please, please, Mr. Petticord, give us a little more time! If only the pipe had been delivered on time we would have had the gold to pay you. We've



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worked so hard, and this is our one big chance. Oh, if you would only renew the mortgage we'll double the interest—even triple it. Surely it would be a good investment for you. The gold is there in the ground—maybe a million dollars worth. Your investment is surely well secured."

"Can't do it young woman. Sorry—but a contract is a contract, you know. By the terms of the contract, the property becomes mine on this day. And I'm here to take possession."

Joe Tuttle's face flushed with anger. "I was a fool to let you furnish the crew to freight that pipe in here! By God, you never intended it should get here on time! I see through your dirty scheme, now—now that it's too late. I was a damned fool to trust you!"

Petticord scowled. "Your accusation of fraud on my part is preposterous. It is no fault of mine that unavoidable delays caused by unforeseen difficulties prevented the prompt delivery of your pipe. And what's more, I'm not going to stand here and take any more of your insolence! I'm giving you time to gather your personal belongings together and get off this property. Will you go peaceably—or must I have my man here throw you off," he paused, with a significant glance at the husky Pete.

Joe Tuttle shot him a glance of astonishment. "But——"

Black John cut him short. "Petticord is right, Joe," he said. "Accordin' to the mortgage you've got to turn this claim over to him today. He's refused to extend the mortgage, an' he's demanded that it's terms be complied with. So, if you an' Ada will throw your stuff in a couple of packsacks, I'll help you pack it acrost the ridge to your other claim."

"But——"

Again Black John cut him short, this time with a show of angry impatience. "Damn it, shut up! Get your stuff together an' get off this claim before you're throw'd off!"

"That's right," Petticord seconded. "There's no 'ifs' nor 'buts' about it! This is your claim on Finnigan's Crick, isn't it?"

"Why—yes—but——"

"Well," Petticord interrupted, "then it is now mine. Git!"

Without another word the Tuttles stepped into the cabin and reappeared a few minutes later with a couple of well-filled packsacks. Black John swung Ada's pack to his shoulders, and struck out across the ridge, followed by the thoroughly bewildered Tuttles.

At the doorway of the new cabin on old Pat Finnigan's claim he swung the pack from his shoulders, and faced the two. "You owe me fifty thousan' dollars," he said, "an' you can have all the time you want to pay it."

The two regarded him, wide-eyed. "What?" Joe gasped.

"Yup—fifty thousan'. An' you can stay right here on your claim till you get it out. It won't take long, after the rest of the pipe gets here. An' it won't be long before it gets here. It's layin' on the bottom of the river in a shallows—right where Petticord had it hid."

"But—I don't understand!" Joe gasped.

"There ain't much to understand, except that you get your pipe for fifty thousan' instead of a hundred thousan'. An' you pay the money over to me, instead of to Petticord. Petticord has just foreclosed on your claim over there on Finnigan's Crick—an' you've got to get along with this one, here on Lucky Crick. An' there ain't the scratch of a pen against it. You see, son, when you told me in Cush's that day that Petticord was tryin' to horn in on old Pat Finnigan's location, I smelt a rat—an' Petticord was the rat.

"He ain't hard to smell—in fact, he stinks to high heaven. That's why I advised you to name your crick Finnigan's Crick. I'd always suspected Petticord was a damn crook, so when he come to me to throw in fifty-fifty with him in a scheme to beat you out of the Finnigan location, I took him up. I seen the chanct to teach another damn crook that crime don't pay. The scheme worked, too—the only difference is that you an' me split Petticord's hundred thousan', fifty-fifty, instead of him an' me splittin' this claim fifty-fifty. So you see, between the two of us we've performed a Christian act—an' made some slight profit on the transaction, to boot."

"It serves him right—the—brute!" Ada cried. "Oh, just think, Joe, the claim is ours—and we owe it all to Black John!"

The big man grinned. "No, not all—jest a measly fifty thousan'. The way this propo-

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sition ort to pay out, you won't hardly notice that."

"I guess a lot of people owe a lot to Black John that they never can repay," Joe said, and turned to the big man. "For my part, I'd be willing to let you in on this whole proposition fifty-fifty. That's the deal you made with Petticord."

Black John shook his head. "Nope. Fifty thousan' is my figure. An' I'm stickin' to it."

A DOZEN men descended the ridge where they had been working on the pipeline and proceeded to the bunkhouse. Ada turned into the cabin. "There are the men going in for dinner," she said, turning to Black John. "You'll eat here with Joe and me. I'll have dinner ready in a jiffy."

At the conclusion of the meal, the three stepped from the cabin to be confronted by Petticord and Pete Jarvis. The attorney greeted them angrily: "Look here—what kind of a swindle have you put over on me?" he demanded.

Black John smiled into the man's narrowed eyes. "Just a common one, Petticord—just a common one. Nothin' fancy. Nothin' like the one you tried to put over on Joe, here—to beat him out of Pat Finnigan's claim."

"But Pete, here, has made a dozen or more pannings, from the dump there beside the shaft, from the bed of the creek, and from the ground between the creek and the rims. He has hardly struck a color—and it's common knowledge that you can pan gold from the grass roots anywhere on the Finnigan claim!"

The big man nodded. "Yeah, I've heard them rumors, too."

"You can't put anything over on me," the man roared. "I tell you, I've been swindled! In Pete's opinion that location over there is worthless!"

"W-e-e-l-l, mebbe not exactly worthless, Petticord. But damn near it."

"I believe this is the original Finnigan claim—not that other one! In some manner you have managed to switch claims on me."

"You've got the one your mortgage calls for," the big man replied, "the location on Finnigan's Crick that Pat Finnigan assigned to Joe an' Ada Tuttle. This here is Lucky Crick—not Finnigan's Crick."

"You can't get away with it!" the man fairly screamed the words. "I'll bring an action in equity! I'll have this matter straightened out in the courts!"

The big man's smile widened. "Oh, come now, Petticord. You, bein' a lawyer, should know the old sayin' that he who comes into a court of equity must come with clean hands. I'm wonderin' how clean the court would say your hands was, when it heard what I had to say—an' also what Red John had to say about your instructions to the freight crew about gummin' up the delivery of that pipe." The words were interrupted by the men from Halfaday who, having finished their meal, were emerging from the bunkhouse a few yards away. Black John glanced toward them, as he added, "The fact is, Petticord, that beneath a mighty thin veneer of respectability, you're nothin' but a damn dirty crook. I don't like crooks—your kind. In fact, I frequently go out of my way to try to show 'em the error of their ways—to implant into their warped an' twisted souls the fact that crime don't pay. I would like to purvey this information free, Petticord, but realizin' that a man values a thing higher if he pays for it, than if it was merely handed to him, I know that you will feel that you're gettin' off cheap at a hundred thousan'. So go your way an' sin no more, Petticord. An' just remember not to attempt to retaliate, nor to molest these young folks in the peaceful enjoyment of their property here. If you should ever show up in these parts again, you'll meet the same fate that One Eyed John met. You'll rec'lect it was his cabin you slept in last night—him that I told you we hung because he tried to beat a young fellow out of his claim.

"With that thought in mind, Petticord, I know that you will feel that you're lucky we're lettin' you off cheap at a hundred thousan'."

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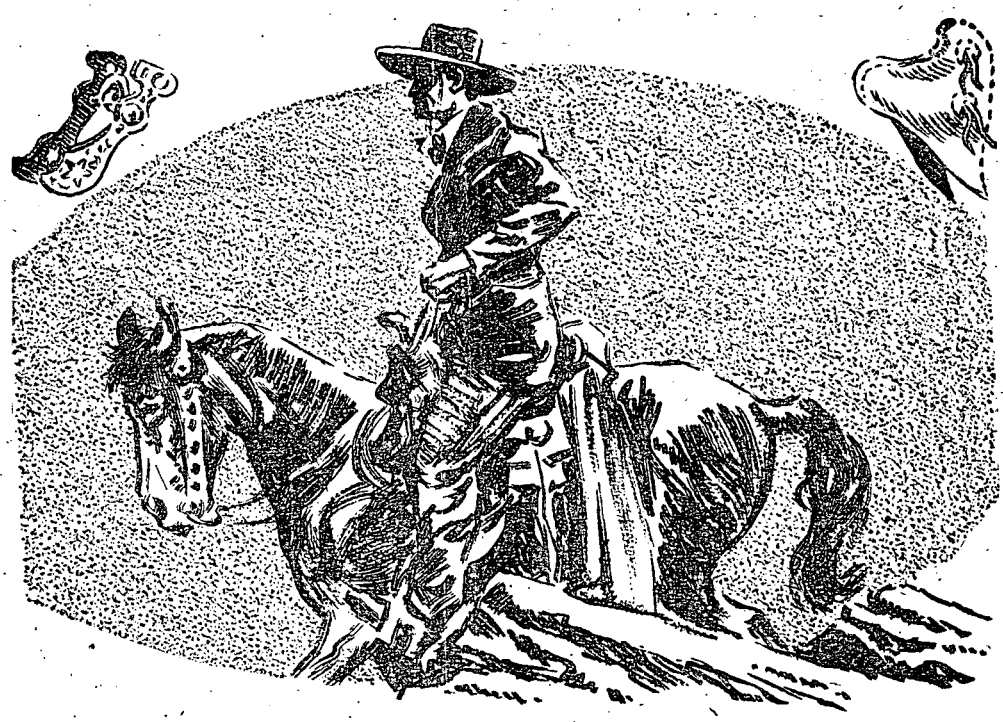
The Road Had Been Washed Out Years Before—Yet There Was a Hideout at the Old Mine . . . . .



THE STIRRUP BOSS

By PETER DAWSON

Conclusion

VI (Continued)

SHERIFF BEN SAYERS was as dead serious in this manhunt as he had been half-hearted about the earlier one. He didn't leave his office until well past eleven; and when he did finally blow out the lamp and trudge wearily out of the courthouse it was to get into the saddle and begin the long ride to the pass road with fourteen other townsmen.

He was worried, really concerned. Furthermore he was uncertain, which was a rare state of mind for him. He usually prided himself on being able to judge men and the fact of his having judged Fred Vance so wrongly was a galling thing. Typically, he had set out to correct that error and try to make amends. He was taking Rita's disappearance as a personal responsibility.

As the horses jogged along, steadily climbing toward the forks of the Summit road, he made a careful summing up of the things he had done to anticipate Vance's moves. First of all Carson, the best man at reading signs in this end of the Territory, was to be at Box at dawn to see if he could pick up Rita's sign and follow it. Sayers fervently hoped that Carson would have some luck. For the marked change this trouble had made in Jim Kirby, aside from the fact that Box's crew was probably already at Stirrup beginning the work of pushing the cattle out, had more than anything else driven home to the law man the seriousness of this thing.

The placing of his possemen had taken some careful thought. He'd had to make his guesses on where Spane and Vance might be holed up and act accordingly, not over-

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looking the fact that he might be wrong. So he had decided to concentrate on that vast sweep of mountainous country stretching southward from Summit to a line directly east of town, where the hills started falling away toward the reservation flats. Just to play it safe, he was even watching that southern flank.

Bill Yount was in charge of six men down there in the south. They were spread thinly, having a twenty-mile stretch of rough country to watch, but they would call on the reservation police for help and Sayers felt he had done the best he could at that end. Joining Yount to the north would be Tom Demmler with his three men. And still farther to the north would be his own main body working the hills to either side of Summit and the pass.

Ben Sayers had a certain idea about Summit; which was the reason, after they had ridden for three hours, that he stopped his men a mile below the settlement and spoke to them seriously for several minutes. Thereafter they split two ways from the road and, threading through the blackness of the aspen forest as they climbed, quietly surrounded the dreary town. Then, four pairs of men working with lanterns, they proceeded to rout out the twenty-odd inhabitants and go through each building down to the last boarded-up shanty. Sidney Connover even took three men back into the timber and searched the ruin of the old sawmill camp.

They discovered nothing. If the dour and sullen collection of shady characters they questioned even knew Spane or Vance they wouldn't even pretend to admit the fact.

Finally, when the posse had gathered in the vacant lot below what was once Summit's general store, Sayers told each man which stretch of country he was to ride. Every man would be in the saddle till ten this morning, at which time half would come to this camp to rest until four in the afternoon, at which time they would go out as a relief to those who had been riding all day. Signals were agreed on—three shots would mean either Vance or Spane, or both, had been sighted, two would indicate that likely sign had been found. Sayers himself would be riding where his fancy took him. He was going south to begin with, to make sure that Demmler had his men where they should be.

The Sheriff started out with the others at ten minutes past four.

AT ABOUT that time, with the first faint grayness tinging the sky shrouding the peaks, Tom Demmler was climbing his bay horse fast through the maze of the higher hills some miles to the south of Summit. Ames, Boynton and Hill were spread out to the south in that order. Tom had purposely picked this northernmost stretch of country to ride, for the canyon Josh had mentioned last night, the one where Fred had lost Spane's sign, lay up there. Tom was now almost even with the head of it, having remembered a vantage-point well above from which he hoped to be able to look out over most of its length at first light.

There was a furtiveness about the way he traveled—he was keeping the hill crests between himself and the line of the ravine, picking rocky going when he could find it—and had anyone asked him why he rode in this manner he would have been hard put to account for it. Why he had even chosen to come up here was another intangible. He did have some vague notion of possibly seeing Childers or Hawks or even Fred. If he met Hawks or Childers he would let them know where it was safe for Fred to ride. If he met Fred himself—well, circumstance would govern what he was to do. He didn't have anything particular in mind, or wouldn't admit to himself that he had.

Now as the light strengthened he became impatient and used the spur on the bay over the last quarter-mile that finally sent him riding up on the broad base of a high pinnacle rock. From here he could see far downward and the ravine was in sight as he had hoped it would be, the pattern of its twisting course already faintly discernible in the thinning blackness. He looked behind him, toward what should have been higher ground, and was unaccountably relieved to find the ground rocky and falling away instead of climbing.

This was important and he sat there a good half minute studying the terrain. This high rock-finger jutted from the down-slope edge of a trough that ran a gradually de-

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scending course along the side of the mountain. The depression deepened as it swung southward and, though the light was poor, Tom decided that a black patch perhaps half a mile down along its course must be a stand of timber. And at that point the trough ran in behind a hill-fold. Its outer parapet varied in height but, he judged, was most places high enough to hide a man on horseback from view of anyone below.

He led the bay on down to the bottom of the depression some thirty feet away and wound the reins about a small jutting ledge. Climbing back to the base of the rock-finger he found a benchlike shelf where he could sit without silhouetting himself, and as he began his vigil he was suddenly hungry for the taste of tobacco, but wouldn't give in to that craving. There was a strange, bleak emptiness in him that defied his understanding, yet he wouldn't probe his thoughts too deeply to find the reason for it.

The light was still poor. He could barely make out the shapes of individual trees down the slope that ran unevenly to the head of the ravine nearly a mile away. Its depths were still in heavy, mysterious shadow.

He had been sitting there for perhaps five minutes when all at once his eyes caught a hint of movement below. Over the next ten seconds he studied the spot without seeing what had moved. Then abruptly a speckled pattern stood out against the dark background barely a hundred yards below and he made out the shape of a fawn standing head high, alerted. The next moment a doe close to the fawn wheeled away and into precipitate flight, the fawn following. Briefly he watched their bounding, wary run before his glance swung back to find the reason for it.

And now another shadowy shape was moving out from the blackness of the trees below the spot where they had been standing. He gradually made out the shape as a man on horseback. The animal was at a slow walk. The rider made a high shape in the saddle even though he was hunched forward and appeared to be studying the ground. He was perhaps three hundred yards away.

Slowly, certainly, the conviction came that it could be no one but Fred Vance.

Tom Demmler's move then was impulsive, headlong. He ran on down to the bay and pulled the carbine from his sheath on the saddle. He levered a shell into the weapon's chamber, softly, slowly, his hands trembling. He was short of breath.

Cat-footing on back into the deep shadow behind the high rock pinnacle he took off his hat and laid it aside. And now for the first time over this brief interval he gave conscious thought to what he was doing.

It hauled him up short, awed, frightened. And across his mind's eye, typically, there flashed a kaleidoscopic and tantalizing series of images, none of which he paused to consider any longer than it took to fit it to his scheme of things.

He saw a defeated and humbled Jim Kirby moving crew and cattle from Stirrup in panicked haste. He saw that vast, rich range abandoned and waiting for the fulfillment of what Fred had written on the deed day before yesterday. He saw the sorry layout where they had driven his father to be locked in by the fastness of the hills.

And he saw Fred Vance's indistinct shape climbing slowly toward him.

Go on! a wild and reckless voice cried from deep in his being. *It's yours for the taking!*

Deliberately, he laid the rifle in line, the hammer cocked. But then as his finger tightened on the trigger he saw Fred turn away downslope again; and in that instant he realized that two other forces were lessening his chances. The light was so poor that the front sight was a fuzzy blue in the notch of the rear. And the range was long, around two hundred yards, at the limit of the .30-.30's effective range.

A cold sweat was breaking out across his brow as he summoned all the hunter's cunning that was in him. He took a coarser aim, lifting the front sight in the buckhorn notch because he was aiming downward. Then he let out half a breath and squeezed with his whole hand.

THE carbine's flat explosion came before he was ready. He saw Fred's animal rear awkwardly, saw Fred falling sideways from the saddle, pulling his rifle from the boot. He levered in another shell and aimed at Fred and fired, instinct alone guiding him. Hard on the heel of the weapon's explosion he heard the buzzing drone of his

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bullet richocheting. Fred was on his feet, the carbine in hand and running downslope. His horse was down now, thrashing.

From deep within Tom Demmler there rose a cold fury at seeing his quarry escaping him. He deliberately aimed at Fred's back, fired. Fred suddenly lost balance and fell in a rolling sprawl and a surge of hope ran through Tom.

But then Fred came to his knees, swinging around, rocking the carbine squarely into line with this spot. A sudden panic hit Tom and he threw himself back out of sight. He was still in motion when a shard of rock settled down off the shelf where he had been sitting a moment ago, followed instantly by the *crack!* of Fred's rifle.

He lunged erect, snatched up his hat and ran down to the bay. He tore the reins loose and wasted a second climbing to the saddle because he had the rifle in hand. He viciously jerked the reins and as the bay lunged to a run down along the rocky trough he somehow managed to get the rifle in its boot.

There were several places where the trough shallowed and there he bent low along the bay's neck, afraid that even in this poor light he might be recognized. When he finally reached the lower fringe of aspen in safety his relief was so vast and overwhelming that he felt suddenly weak, weary to the bone.

He stopped there where the trees hid him, looking back. The distance was great and only by locating the rock-finger did he finally see Fred's faint shape climbing the slope toward his downed animal. Then, from far below, he caught the rapid mutter of hoof-echoes and knew that either Childers or Hawks must be on their way up to Fred.

He got out of there then, going fast.

THAT crouching shadowy figure having slid out of his sight a fraction of a second before he fired, Fred lunged erect and started running up the slope, catching his breath at a sharp stab of pain in his side. He had taken but a dozen strides when a hoof-clatter from above told him that Spane —for he reasoned it could be no one but Spane—was getting away.

He stood there breathing hard, hunched over and favoring his right side, the black anger in him slowly subsiding. His glance followed the sound of the going-away horse and once he briefly glimpsed the rider as a dark hunched-over shadow moving swiftly across a break in that upward parapet of rock. Then, the hoof-falls gradually fading downward toward a rim of timber, he plodded wearily on up to the brown. And from below now he caught the strengthening pound of another horse on the run and coming toward him.

He supposed it must be Josh. It really didn't matter. Nothing mattered except that he'd had his chance at Spane and had lost it. He looked down at the brown, dead now, and turned away with a deep sigh of disgust. And then the cool wetness along his side made him look down there for the first time.

His jumper was already darkly stained and when he pulled it aside it was to see a bigger patch of crimson on his shirt just above the belt. When he pulled out the tail of his shirt the cool air hit the wound and made it smart painfully.

The bullet had left a deep three-inch channel in the flesh along the line of his bottom rib. The bone had evidently turned the lead, which had lost its drive because of the distance it had traveled.

When Josh ran his horse hard up the slope, a minute later, Fred was sitting by the brown holding a bandana to the wound. The old wolfer pulled his heaving horse to a stand close by, saw the blood and breathed, "Good God, I thought they'd got you! Who was it?"

"Spane." Fred's head tilted toward the rock-finger above. "He was up there. He could be a better shot."

Josh swung aground and dropped the reins, kneeling alongside his expression a worried one. He pulled Fred's hand aside and saw the ugly wound. "Not much better. You mean to say he—"

He cut his words short as a distant crashing sound, much like a rider pushing his way through brush might make, shuttled across from along the slope toward the north.

"Bill," Fred said.

But Josh shook his head. "If it's Bill, someone's with him." . . . His glance became alarmed . . . "You know what that means, don't you?"

Fred nodded, already coming to his feet.

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He was looking in the direction of the sound and shortly saw two horsemen break out of the trees six or seven hundred yards away and below. Their horses were at a slow, slogging run as they climbed this way.

It was Josh who said, "The one behind's Bill. And if the other isn't Ben Sayers it's his twin. Well, friend, what now?"

Fred laid the bandana against his side and quickly pushed in the tail of his shirt, drawling, "You walk from here on, Josh." And he stepped over to Josh's gray horse.

Josh's worried look deepened. "You're only beatin' your head against a wall, son," he said gently. "Now's the time to quit. Bill and me will keep the pack from jumpin' you."

"No. I'm still going to find Spane." Fred was in the saddle now, legs bent to the too-short stirrups.

"You're bleedin' like a stuck hog."

"It'll stop."

Josh sighed resignedly and, with a quick look at Bill and Sayers, said, "Then be on your way. Any idea where you'll be holed up?"

Fred nodded. "If I have to hole up it'll be Bady's mine."

"How can you? The road's been gone for over three years."

Reining away, Fred said, "You can get in from above." He touched the gray with the spur and as he started away called back, "Lola Demmler told me about it."

Josh slowly shook his head, watching Fred angle across the slope then dip out of sight into the depression that lined obliquely downward toward the aspens. Then he turned deliberately, watching Sayers approach.

The law man was red-faced and as winded as his horse when he pulled in alongside Josh. His wary, excited glance went to the aspen grove and he snapped, "Vance, wasn't it?"

"Was it?"

BILL CHILDERS came in on the other side of the wolfer as Sayers' angry glance swung down. For a moment it seemed the law man was about to lose his weak hold on his temper. But then he gave a spare smile and, reaching to his thigh, lifted his Colt out and aimed it skyward.

The three quick shots he fired wakened booming echoes that rolled along the dawn-lighted mountain. He holstered the weapon deliberately and looked at the dead brown up the slope. "How did that happen?" he asked.

"Well, it was like this, Sheriff," Josh said. "I was easin' up here kind of slow when a big buck took out from that brush yonder. I made a grab for the rifle and it wouldn't come loose. First thing I knew I'd—"

"You'd shot your nag through the chest," Sayers cut in dryly. "Those accidents happen, don't they, Hawks?"

"They sure do."

The law man eyed Bill now. "You might as well get down and sit a while, Childers. We've got all day for this. There ought to be at least ten men here within the hour. Meantime, you two take it easy."

"Meanin' we're under arrest, Ben?" Josh asked.

"Not exactly. Let's say I'm just keeping an eye on you. In case of any more accidents."

The old wolfer shrugged. His sober glance came around to Bill and he slowly closed one eye, the eye away from Sayers.

Ames had come up Anderson's trail at four, riding a little further in this direction than need be before starting his climb into the higher hills. It was Tom who had suggested that he stop at the homestead.

Anderson's dog had wakened the family and the homesteader had come out. Once Anderson had the story he went on in and told it to his wife while he was getting ready to go along with Ames, whispering so as not to waken Lola in the front room.

But Lola was awake and the men had hardly left the clearing before she put on her wrapper and went to the kitchen where Mildred had been fixing food for her husband to take along.

That was the beginning of one of the worst days Lola could remember.

There was no point in going back to bed, so she and Mildred had eaten then, both of them shocked over what had happened to Rita. As soon as it was light Lola started on home. She was barely a quarter-mile out the trail when the faint echoes of rifle shots reached her out of the dawn stillness.

In her imagining she saw Fred being taken, wounded probably, perhaps dead. Or

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he might have made a getaway, in which case they were surely hunting him. She had never known such a feeling of impotence and dread as when, after listening for several more minutes and hearing nothing, she started on.

Later, after she had spent a sober interval wondering about Tom's part in all this, she was mercifully spared hearing Sayers' signal shots, though her worry could scarcely have been greater. For she was remembering what Tom had said after his meeting with Spane there at the corral the other night; and slowly the conviction was coming to her that Jeff Spane had neither the cunning nor the courage to have done this thing on his own.

Tom was the only one who, having seen this sure way of clubbing Jim Kirby into submission, would dare run the risk of carrying it through. It was impossible to believe that Fred Vance had patched up his differences with Spane to the point of working with the man. No, Tom must surely be the guilty one. He had been involved with Spane, he was still involved with him. And as she faced this certainty she saw all her hard-bought security of the past year falling away. Only recently had she felt that people were forgiving her for her divorce, accepting her again. And now Tom's treachery threatened to wipe out all the fruits of her humility and sacrifice, for if it was discovered she would be condemned along with him.

She couldn't fathom her brother's motives beyond sensing that his legacy of hatred toward the big outfits must surely be driving him. Knowing his weak and opportunist ways, she also sensed that it was characteristice of him to be taking this advantage of Jim Kirby and at the same time be serious in his intentions toward Rita. Had Tom shown her the signed deed for The Springs range, along with the statement Fred had written on it, she would have known immediately that he was making a strong bid for Stirrup, that he had completely lost his integrity; but he had carefully avoided letting her see the deed for this very reason. So, though she halfway grasped the enormity of his deception, she saw it as simply a foolhardy and spiteful undertaking that was gaining him nothing but a shabby revenge at great risk.

She rode down on the cabin just past seven o'clock and as her apprehension grew stronger she spent the next several hours at her housework, knowing that to keep busy was the only possible way of taking her mind from her troubles. She mixed a batch of bread and set it to rise, she aired the bedding and shook out all the rugs, she rearranged the shelves in the kitchen cupboard. Then, because the house finally became unbearable with its constant reminders of Tom, she took some twine and a knife and went to the foot of the yard path and began pruning and tying in place the thorny tangle of the rose trellis. That was where Sidney Connover found her when he came out the lower trail and along the small meadow shortly past mid-day.

She saw that Sidney's face was set in its usual soberness as he rode on up and reined in just short of her. He touched his hat then in his typically polite way, saying, "Tom sent me with word for you, Lola. He thought you ought to know."

She felt a sudden constriction in her throat that wouldn't let her speak and her wild imagining pictured a number of dread things that might have happened. Her look must have been transparent, for he was quick to add, "Nothing's happened except that Sayers himself has seen Vance 'way up to the north. Vance was with Hawks and Childers. He had somehow lost his horse. He got away on Hawks' jughead and now I'm on the way in to get a telegram off to Sheriff Robbins across in Granite. Sayers wants him to bring some men across the county line and work in from the far side of the hills." He paused briefly, adding, "Then there's this business about Tom."

"What about Tom?" Lola's voice was hushed with fear.

"He was too far away to hear the shots when Sayers flushed Vance. Then when he did show up he and Sayers had a real set-to. Worse than the one last night at the courthouse."

"Why, Sidney?"

"Tom's sticking up for Vance, claims he would never have done this. He even admitted to riding up Squaw last night and warning Vance of what was coming."

"Good!" Lola breathed, a sudden forlorn hope in her that she had misjudged Tom. But then she knew that this would be his

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way, pretending loyalty toward Fred when he felt none at all. And now she tried to smile convincingly as she said, "It was good of you to go to the trouble of bringing me word, Sidney."

His glance was fixed gravely on her. "You think a great deal of Fred Vance, don't you, Lola?"

"Yes. A great deal."

"You don't believe he had anything to do with Rita's disappearance?"

"No."

"I had hoped—"

He caught himself and tried not to appear ill at ease as he went on. "Tom wanted me to tell you not to worry. He thinks Vance can find a place to hole up till they've found Rita. Fact is, he seemed to have a definite place in mind. Asked me to tell you that it's a place only you and he know about."

Bady's! she thought instantly, trying to hide her awareness of Tom's meaning by innocently asking, "I wonder what he was thinking of?"

"I wonder." Sidney smiled meagerly. "Ben Sayers would skin me alive if he knew I told you this. He isn't letting Tom work with the others, nor Hawks or Childers. Just as I left he had asked Tom to go on out and find Kirby, give him the word that Vance had been seen."

"And I suppose the senator is offering a really big reward this time for Fred?" Lola asked dryly.

Sidney shook his head seriously. "No. This has knocked the wind out of Kirby. All he wants is to get Rita back. He's got every man on his crew over there at Stirrup pushing his cattle out." He touched his hat once more and, reining his horse on around, said, "I'd better be on the way."

"Goodbye, Sidney. And thank you."

His, "See you soon, Lola," as he was going away seemed a hollow promise. She stood watching until he had ridden out of sight into the pines, idly wondering what it was he had left unsaid a moment ago, halfway knowing what it might have been and wishing she had said something to bolster his unworded hope. She was fond of Sidney Connover but was too honest to deceive him in any way.

She forgot him then as her thoughts turned to the possibility of Fred being at Bady's. And gradually a slender ray of hope shone through the gloom of her despair. If she could only see Fred and talk to him he might perhaps make bearable the burden of her thoughts. Sidney had said that the posse was far to the north, which meant that it was unlikely anyone would see her riding that high country. She supposed that it would take her three or four hours to get up to the mine. But she was going. She was going now.

She was running as she went up the path to the cabin.

IT WAS mid-afternoon when Fred glimpsed two riders less than a quarter mile below him. They had topped a rise and were slowly working this way along a hill fold he had traveled earlier. He knew then that he would have to be on the move and, favoring his right side, he swung stiffly to the saddle.

Over the next three hours he put Josh's tough, hard-mouthed gray up to timberline and there, keeping to the bare granite of the boulder fields, he swung sharply south. By five the high alp of Sentinel Peage was close on his left and he was riding for the notch Lola and Tom had last fall traveled on the elk hunt.

Without knowing what he did he would have turned back shortly after dropping into the notch, for to all appearances it was impassable. First he climbed around a thirty-foot-high rock slide that seemingly blocked the way. The worst was a two hundred yard stretch of narrow bare rock ledge flanking a sheer drop into a deep canyon where dusk was already setting. Down there somewhere was the break in the road.

He led the gray along the ledge. Beyond, around a shoulder of the peak, he came to the broad, timbered bench with the rusty sheet-iron roof of Bady's shaft-house a dull red blob through the thin sprinkling of jackpine and aspen.

He was feeling the wetness along his side as he had this morning, which meant that the bullet-gouge had pulled open again. So when he came to the first grassy open stretch along the bench he eased wearily out of the saddle and dropped the reins. And as the gray began feeding, he pressed his right arm against the pad of the bandana and let his head drop to his knees, admitting

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for the first time that he was nearly played out. He realized that he must have lost a lot of blood and as he looked back over the day he knew it was one of the hardest he had ever spent in the saddle. It had netted him exactly nothing. He had had to give up the hunt for Spane as the posse crowded him higher into the hills. Now it looked like he was here to stay, powerless to move until this thing was decided one way or another.

These were his bleak thoughts when suddenly a sound shuttled down to him from above, from the direction of the ledge. His head lifted, he looked around. What he saw made him reach for the handle of the Colt he had taken from Byars the other night.

A rider was coming down off this near end of the ledge onto the bench. For a long moment Fred's frame was tense. He had lifted the Colt halfway clear of his belt when all at once he recognized that rider and sighed his relief.

It was Lola Demmler.

She saw him now and ran her horse down to him. She was smiling radiantly as she drew in close by. He came to his feet and then she saw the stain along his side and her face lost color.

"Fred!" she breathed. "They didn't tell me you were hurt!"

"Who didn't?"

She understood his concern at once, answering, "Tom got the word to me. Don't worry, no one else knows you're here." She came aground and over to him, staring down at his side with a frightened look. "Let me see it, Fred."

"Nothing but a chunk of skin gone from my ribs." He pulled open the shirt.

He heard her catch her breath as she gingerly pulled the bandana away and at once she said, "Sit down. We're going to have to do something about that."

He watched her as she went back to the horse and unlaced a pair of pouches from the saddle. She brought them across and knelt beside him, giving him a brief and tender look that had so much of her heart in it that it shocked him and gave him an instant physical awareness of her.

"You can't travel far with this." She was taking a bottle of whiskey from one of the saddle-bags, uncorking it and pouring some of the liquid on a clean handkerchief.

"That'd worry me if I had anywhere to go," he told her.

She leaned very close to him now, her coppery hair lightly brushing against his face as she said, "Hold your breath. This will hurt." Then suddenly she pressed the moist handkerchief to his side.

The whiskey bit into the wound like salt and as he stiffened she said, "Now tell me how it happened."

As he began talking she worked at his side, washing the wound clean, finally pouring some of the whiskey on it. When he had finished speaking she said, "So now you're up here and can do nothing. Have you wondered what's to happen from now on?" She sat back on her heels watching him in that same deeply interested way of a moment ago.

He shrugged, puzzled by the directness and the intimate quality of her glance. "There are times when a man can't see very far ahead, Lola."

"Have you been looking ahead at all since you came home?"

He didn't grasp her meaning. "You're saying I haven't?"

"I don't know, Fred. We're practically strangers. But I've often wondered what you hope to get out of all this—this wrangle with Kirby."

HER seriousness suited her well, he was thinking. Yet he didn't undestand her strangely intimate manner, her wanting to probe at his thoughts, and he said defensively, "A man doesn't let another just step in and take what's his."

For a moment she weighed what he had said with no break in her soberness. Then, with the faintest of smiles, she told him, "I can understand that. But there must be something else driving you. Is it a woman, Fred?"

"No. Should it be?"

"That's what usually drives a man." She moistened the handkerchief again and, pressing it to the wound, made a pad of his bandana to cover it. Her touch was light and sure as she pushed the shirt inside his belt and sat back again. "If you keep it clean it will heal."

A feeling of gratefulness for what she had done was strong in him now and, realizing what her coming here meant, he said,

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"A man never knows who his real friends are. This means a lot to me, Lola."

"Does it?" Once again he was aware of a deep and surprising response in her. "Then if it does you'll leave, Fred. You'll leave the country and not come back."

"Leave? Now, when they've put a brand on me that doesn't belong?"

"Yes," she said quietly. "Nothing's to be gained by your staying. Nothing. And you can lose everything—even your life."

Her gravity awed him and for a moment he had the disconcerting conviction that she was halfway right. When she went on her voice held even a deeper tenderness and a sadness. "You must have found a good life somewhere else or you wouldn't have stayed away so long. Go back to it, Fred. Go back before it's too late!"

"There's nothing to go back to."

"Perhaps there could be something." She spoke very softly and there was an unmistakable longing in her eyes as she all at once asked, "Would there be if I went with you?"

He was too surprised to speak and for a long moment she studied his expression. "You see, Fred, there's nothing left for me here. I made a mistake. People will never forget that. This time I wouldn't be making one. You are everything I have ever wanted, and more."

HE WAS groping for words, for some way of telling her that he didn't share her feelings. And in that moment he was taking a strict accounting of his emotions, seeing Lola Demmler in all her attractiveness; and it came to him that in time he might feel as she did now.

He was about to speak when she shook her head.

"Don't, Fred!" She came to her knees then and leaned closer to tell him "Don't say it. And I understand. This is only a beginning. Perhaps some day I'll have the answer I want—now that you know."

She bent quickly forward and touched her lips to his and suddenly a wave of desire swept through him and his arms came about her and he held her close, answering the hunger of her lips. But then abruptly she drew away, lowering her head, trembling before a gust of emotion as she breathed, "This is something I can remember. Always. I'm going now, Fred. Don't say anything. Don't even watch me go."

She rose slowly and turned away. She was in the saddle before she said matter-of-factly:

"There's food there. And I'll try and come back tomorrow to let you know how things are."

His glance followed her all the way up the slope, until she had ridden out of sight around the shoulder of the mountain toward the ledge. And for many moments he sat thinking of her, wondering what halter there had been on his emotions that had kept him from giving way to the strong pull of her physical attractiveness, her offering herself, until that moment when their lips had met. Even now his desire had left him and he could look back on the moment he had held her in his arms with only a slight stir of feeling.

Finally the answer came to him and the knowing brought on his worry again. He caught himself comparing Rita and Lola and dismissed the thought, knowing he had unconsciously made a choice and that in making it he was the loser. For Rita was not for him.

He got up with Lola's saddle-bags slung over his good arm and sauntered on across to the gray, picking up the reins and leading the animal on down through the trees toward the shaft-house. His thinking was at dead-center. He was tired. He wanted nothing so much as to lie down and sleep the clock around.

There was a good stand of grass between the trees and the long slanting heap of the muck-dump. He staked the gray out there, carried the saddle on out beyond the reach of the picket rope and dropped it. He unthonged Josh's bedroll and, with it slung over his shoulder, started up the weed-grown path that led to the single empty doorway of the shaft-house. Knowing the high country and the likelihood of there being a shower sometime during the night, he was going to sleep under a roof no matter what sort.

He was twenty feet from the head of the path when a whisper of sound from above made him lift his glance.

There, leaning in the doorway, stood Jeff Spane with a Colt in his hand.

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VII

THE shock of surprise held Fred motionless. And over those next few seconds a cold and killing fury was building in him. Here before him stood the man who had laid hands on Rita, a mocking look in his eyes and an expression of gloating on his sallow face. Fred was fighting an almost overpowering impulse to run headlong at Spane, to get his hands on him and beat the life out of him.

"Now isn't this luck," Spane shortly drawled, coming on out of the head of the path and hefting the .45 in a spare, menacing gesture. "Keep those hands where they are, friend. And turn around."

Fred didn't move. "Where is she?" he asked tonelessly.

Spane's head tilted toward the empty doorway. "In here. And lonesome, too. She'll be glad for some company. Turn around, I said."

For a second Fred tried to think of a way out of this, of a move that would give him a chance at Spane. But he had no chance. Both his hands were lifted—one holding the saddle-bags slung across his shoulder, the other steadying the bedroll—and his gun was at his belt; he was dead the instant he let go the bedroll to draw.

So he deliberately turned his back on the small man and a moment later heard Spane's boots grating against the rubble of the path, closing in on him. The hard snout of the .45 came solidly against his spine and Spane's move of lifting the Colt from his belt was deft, fast. Then once again he heard Spane's steps and shortly the rustler said, "Okay, come on up."

Spane was waiting there to one side of the doorless opening, his back to a litter of refuse—broken timbers, some twisted lengths of rusty sheet-iron fallen from the roof, broken machinery parts and a pile of broken clay retorts and pieces of glass. Fred started toward him and he edged further back, saying, "Straight on in. And stop when I sing out."

The inside of the building seemed gloomy and cavernous as Fred came even with the doorway and looked in. He could make out no detail except that close beyond was a broad heavy bench with the shadow of a big cable-wheel hanging low over it.

He was stepping through the opening when his glance picked out a hip-high length of two-by-four against the wall close to his right. He went on another step and then suddenly wheeled to the right, letting saddle-bags and bedroll go and snatching up the length of wood. Before his swing was completed he hurled the timber hard at the doorway, lunging on into the deeper shadows away from the slope.

The two-by-four banged solidly against the doorway and he heard it go skidding down the path. He was taking his second quick stride when suddenly he tripped over something solid and fell headlong against a solid wall.

Even as he rolled to his knees and surged erect Spane's low laugh was sounding. "Stub your toe, Vance?" he asked smoothly, stepping into the doorway and looking squarely at Fred. "I should have warned you. There's a dead end on that side." He tilted his head again, indicating the end of the building abutting the mountain. "Try it this way."

Fred was hunched over slightly, his side hurting as he came on past Spane and walked into the shadows beyond. He passed a high, timbered ore-bin, able to see more detail now that his eyes were accustomed to the half-light. He climbed a series of steps that flanked the muck-car rails and beyond that the shadows deepened almost to complete darkness until finally, close ahead, he made out a plank door set in the granite face of the mountainside. The twin lines of the rails went under the door, which was held fast by a sturdy hasp with a rail-spike thrust through its ring. This was the entrance of the mine's tunnel and shaft.

"Take down the lantern and light it," Spane said from behind him.

Fred saw a lantern hanging from a peg to one side of the door and reached it down, levering open the chimney. As his hand went to shirt-pocket for a match he was trying to gauge how far behind him Spane must be standing, for he was going to wheel and throw the lantern.

But then suddenly there came the hammer-click of Spane's gun and the man was saying, "No one can hear this thing now if I let it off, Vance. Don't try anything!"

Those words eased the tightness from

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Fred's nerves and sobered him as nothing else had. For the first time then he completely grasped the full measure of the man's vicious nature. There had been no mercy in him the other night when he gave Bill Childers the beating, he would kill at the slightest provocation now: He had nothing to lose.

So Fred lit the lantern and as the wavering light drove back the shadows Spane told him, "Open 'er up."

He set the lantern down, lifted the spike from the hasp and pulled the door open.

Rita Kirby stood there looking out at him.

She was tall and slender, utterly lovely with her expression of sheer surprise at sight of him. For a moment her deep brown eyes were puzzled, disbelieving. Then she glanced beyond at Spane, saw the gun and understood. Her look took on a quality of radiant gladness. And suddenly the pent-up emotion overflowed the dam of her restraint, her eyes filled with tears and, choking back a sob, she came out and into Fred's arms.

It seemed very natural that he should draw her close and put a hand to her head pressed so tightly against his chest. Her hands gripped the front of his jumper as she tried to control her sobbing. He could feel her whole body trembling and knew she was hungering for the assurance of this physical contact with someone she knew and trusted to wipe out the nightmare of the long, tormented hours of being locked in darkness. He was humble in the face of her complete trust in him, and as he felt the tension slowly going out of her he realized that this was one of the rare moments of his life; for it was as though she were completely his, returning the emotion stirring him so deeply.

Her head lifted now and there was a disconcerting warmth and tenderness in her tear-filled eyes as she softly told him, "This makes everything all right, Fred. Everything. Just this."

"Was it bad for you, Rita?" His glance lifted to Spane, the softness going from it.

"Only in the beginning. It was—was my fault, I guess. I tried to break away."

Spane's look had taken on a faint quality of alarm as she was speaking. But now his face once again set in its arrogant, evil cast as he said, "She fought like a damned cat! Sure, I had to rope her onto her hull to get her up here. I'll be just as glad to get rid of her as she will of me." He nodded to the tunnel opening. "In you go, both of you."

Rita looked around at him. "What are you doing with us?"

"Lockin' you in there together. Maybe for the night, maybe not that long, dependin' on how fast they get up here to turn you loose."

" 'They'?" Fred asked. When Spane only smiled, he put another question. "You mean the man you're working with?"

Spane still only smiled and shortly Rita said, "He won't talk. At first he claimed you were the one, Fred. Every time he'd say that I would tell him he lied. Then finally when I kept on asking he just wouldn't bother to answer."

Fred had been watching Spane closely. "So you're pulling out. For good?"

Spane nodded briefly. "For good."

"It won't be as easy for you as it was this morning." Fred took his arms from around Rita and stepped back, lifting a hand to his side. "Sayers has got thirty or forty men down there now."

A look of alarm crossed Rita's face as she saw Fred's motion and now she said in a hushed voice, "You've been hurt! How, Fred?"

"Our friend here." He nodded to Spane, adding, "Two inches further in and he'd have had what he wanted. As it is all his lead did was scrape a rib."

He noticed Spane's puzzled look even before Rita asked, "This morning, you say?"

"Yes. Just before sun-up."

"But—" she glanced quickly at Spane, then up at Fred again— "that couldn't be, Fred. He was here with me. He let me walk up with him to change the ropes on the horses. It was just getting light."

As Fred was taking this in, realizing the significance of what she had said, Spane drawled dryly, "So there's one mark you don't chalk up against me, friend." Abruptly he motioned with the Colt to the tunnel-mouth, eyeing Rita. "You first."

When she didn't move from his side, Fred touched her arm, looking down and nodding. And as she stepped over and into the tunnel, he asked, "Do we get the lantern?"

"So you can burn your way out? Hunh-

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uh!" Again Spane hefted the Colt. "In you go, Vance."

Fred sauntered on over through the door and in beside Rita. Behind him, Spane said, "Keep movin'." So he took Rita's arm and started deeper into the black maw of the tunnel.

He was waiting for Spane's move and when it came every nerve in him drew taut. Spane's boots grated behind him and then the shaft of the lantern's light shining weakly along the tunnel suddenly narrowed.

Fred looked at Rita, then beyond her to see that the wall fell away there into a deep pocket. And at the instant it became completely dark with the door's closing he pushed her out of line toward the inset, saying quickly, "Get back! As far as you can!" He was wheeling around as he spoke.

He lunged toward the door, marking it by the slit of light showing beneath it between the rails. He heard the click of the hasp a split-second before his shoulder hit the door with all the driving weight of his big frame behind it.

The door swung sharply open for two feet before it hit Spane. The man's grunt of pain was plainly audible as the door jammed a moment. Then suddenly the lantern clattered to the floor, guttering out. And on the heel of that sound Fred caught another as some object thudded to the planks.

In the feeble light he plainly saw the cedar-handled Colt skid across the floor beyond the door. Then the door suddenly swung further back before his weight and he was going to his knees as Spane's shape moved into sight.

Spane took two quick strides away and all at once halted, spraddle-legged. Fred threw himself belly-down against the planking as Spane's .45 arched up and shattered the momentary silence with the deafening concussion of three thought-quick shots. From somewhere in the tunnel came the vicious droning of a bullet glancing from rock. Instantly, Spane was wheeling away at a run for the steps and the lower level of the building.

Fred lunged erect. A stride carried him to where the other gun lay. Fear clawed at him, a dread that Spane might fire again and hit Rita, and he lined the Colt and threw a shot down the alleyway alongside the ore-bin where Spane had a moment ago disappeared. He followed his bullet at a run, hauling up short when he was down the steps and within sight of the doorway at the head of the path. He started in on it warily, slowly, the Colt cocked and lined.

ALL at once a stray sound shuttled in to him from outside. He moved on into the doorway to see Spane below the foot of the path working in frantic haste to put the bridle on the gray. Even at this distance, a good fifty yards, Fred could see the naked fear written on the man's face.

Spane saw him then and dodged in behind the gray, pulling the animal sharply around. A moment later the horse broke into a run with Spane holding tight to his mane and throwing a leg over his back. Spane somehow managed to pull himself astride and the next instant turned and lined his Colt.

His shot and Fred's came simultaneously in one prolonged thunderclap. His bullet slapped into the board siding of the building several feet out of line. But at the precise moment Fred's gun had bucked against his hand he had seen Spane's spare body jerk convulsively.

For a moment Spane swayed off-balance. Then, riding well out of range, he pulled himself erect and raked his heels along the gray's flanks. And there was nothing for Fred to do but stand there watching the gray run on out of sight into the trees that hid the end of the ledge-trail.

He sighed wearily, helplessly, and turned to see Rita standing there in the doorway close behind him.

"Well, he's on the way out," he drawled impotently.

"Let him go, Fred," she said in a low voice. "You're here and that's all that matters now."

She came in beside him, laying a hand on his arm and looking out along the slope for a long moment. Then she lifted her glance to meet his and there was an expression of longing and thankfulness in her eyes as she murmured, "I've never been so afraid. I—I thought he had killed you."

Her look was so wholly yielding, so much for him alone, that for a moment the hunger to take her in his arms swayed him

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closer to her. But then he remembered she could never be his and drew back again.

A wondering look lighted her eyes as she caught his hesitation. All at once she lifted her hands to his face, her touch light and caressing. Then, gently, she drew his face down and kissed him full on the mouth.

THE early hours of the day had been an endless nightmare for Tom Demmler, beginning with the realization that his shots at Fred had missed the mark. He had cut a wide fast circle down out of that high country and, as Sidney Connover told Lola, managed to make a convincing story of having been along the upper canyon of the Squaw at the time of Sayers' encounter with Vance.

The sheriff and Tom had their wrangle in front of four other possemen, slowing Sayers' efforts to get them out on Fred's trail. It had been such a convincing argument that directly afterward Josh Hawks had led Tom aside and taken him into his confidence, told him of Fred's mention of Bady's mine. That news jolted Tom in the same way his missed shots had earlier, for the chance that Fred might meet Spane threw his calculations far out of their delicate balance. All his luck today had been bad.

Afterward, when he left on the errand Sayers had given him of taking Jim Kirby the news of Vance, Tom's resentment toward Lola for having told Fred of Bady's crowded everything else from his mind for most of the long interval it took him to come down out of the hills. He was almost panicked over the possibility of Fred going up there and actually running into Jeff and Rita.

But finally he reasoned that this was unlikely. Hadn't Hawks and Childers said that Fred was half crazy with worry over Rita? Hadn't they said he was hunting Spane and wouldn't hole up unless the posse crowded him too closely? According to them he hadn't been badly hurt; he was able to ride. *Then why worry?* he asked himself, in the end convinced that with all this country to hide in Fred had at least the rest of this day and probably most of tomorrow before Sayers could hope to begin really closing in on him. And by tomorrow Spane would be gone and it wouldn't matter who showed up at the mine.

Sayers having put him on his own, not trusting him to work with the posse, seemed the one good turn his luck had taken today. For he was meeting Spane at the corral tonight shortly after dark, meeting him for the last time. Sayers had made that easy. Spane would be on his way out with the last of the Marolt money; or rather that was how they had planned it, though Tom had revised those plans somewhat. Now that he didn't have to account to Sayers for his whereabout he could ride where he chose.

HE THOUGHT he knew where he could find Jim Kirby and had been riding toward Stirrup rather than Box. It was around mid-day when from the crest of a hill high along Stirrup's east boundary he sighted a dull gray blob in the distance and guessed it to be Box's chuck-wagon.

It was. Joe Banks was the only man at the wagon when Tom rode in there some twenty minutes later. The wrangler was taking four horses from the long line of the picket rope and, answering Tom's query, said, "The boss? You'll find him somewhere along the north fence workin' with Foster and a couple others. Today he's just one more man to keep on top of a fresh horse. Same as the cook. Lord, we been puttin' in hours! Since one this mornin'. Anything new, Demmler?"

Tom told him about Vance and then went on across to the chuckwagon where he helped himself to a plate of cold beans and some jerky. An hour later, two miles to the north, he spotted a thin haze of dust and rode across it to find Jim Kirby riding the drag alone behind twenty-five or thirty head of his Box-branded steers. Ed Foster and Red Owens were working the draws along the swings.

Kirby was barely civil in his greeting. He listened without a change of expression to the story of Sayers' encounter with Vance, walking his horse on behind his gather of bawling cattle with Tom close alongside.

"Who was it took the shots at him?" he wanted to know when Tom had finished. His look was bleak, made more so by a day's stubble of grey whiskers shadowing his craggy face.

"Hawks says it was Spane."

"They better watch that damned old

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coot!" Kirby said heatedly. "He's more than likely in with Vance on this."

Tom said nothing and shortly Kirby asked in a clipped voice, "You think it was Spane?"

Tom nodded. "Yes. I think Vance would kill Spane if he could find him."

"So you've really gone and stuck your neck out for Vance. Last night I figured you might change your mind. Does Sayers know?"

"Sure. That's why I'm down here instead of up there. Ben wants me out of the way."

Kirby digested this information over a long silence, once swinging hurriedly away to cut back a cow that tried to bolt toward a side draw. When he came in beside Tom again he said, "First Rita, now you. What the hell kind of a spell does this Vance work on you people?" Before Tom could insert a word, he half turned in the saddle to move an arm into the north, continuing heatedly, "You know what Ed and I found this morning? Cut wire. A lot of it, same as there is over west. That rain washed out most of the sign, but I'd say Vance has taken more cattle out this end than he tried to over my way."

Smiling thinly, Tom drawled, "Didn't he warn you?"

Kirby accepted this reminder with a strange lack of anger, staring soberly ahead. Tom sensed that he must be thinking of Rita. When the man next spoke he was sure of it, for Kirby said, "All I'm interested in is pulling out of this mess with a whole hide. Though I'd give every dollar to my name to be looking at Vance over the barrel of this thing." And he slapped the stock of the carbine riding in its scabbard under his knee.

Tom nodded to the animals plodding on ahead of them. "Want me to stick around and give you a hand, Senator?"

"If you've nothing better to do," was Kirby's answer. So Tom went on ahead and began working with Owens and Foster, taking turns with them in riding the hill folds to either side, gathering in every Box animal they came across. And by three o'clock they made a count of forty-one.

It was shortly afterward that Kirby hailed Tom and beckoned him on back to the drag again. He let Tom walk his horse beside him for all of two minutes before looking around abruptly to ask, "Tom, could you find Vance if you had to?"

"Find him?" Tom frowned. "Now, you mean?"

"Today. Now."

Tom considered this a long moment, finally asked, "Why?"

"You want to find Rita, don't you?"

"Sure. But she's not with Vance."

"I happen to think she is."

When Tom only lifted his heavy shoulders, Kirby went on, "But never mind if she is or isn't. Spane said he was holding her till I'd pulled out of Stirrup, didn't he? All right, I'm pulling out. We moved upward of eighty head through the wire between one this morning and noon. There's close to fifty more here and the others ought to have as many in their gather. I'm keeping the men at it tonight. By dark tomorrow we'll have the layout cleared. So I've made my end of the bargain, haven't I?"

"You have. But it's Spane you want to find, not Vance. And he doesn't give a damn about your pulling out of here. That was a stall."

Kirby's look was baffled and he said in an angry way, "All I asked you was could you find Vance if you had to."

"Maybe I can, maybe not. It'd be pure accident if I could."

"You'd know where to start looking, though."

Tom tilted his head reluctantly, uneasy over the turn the conversation was taking as Kirby asked, "Then will you take me along and start lookin'?"

"And have you put a hole through him if we do find him?" Tom smiled wryly. "No."

Kirby's jaw set hard and, reaching down, he drew the carbine from its sheath and leaned down in the saddle to drop it into the grass. "That satisfy you?"

Tom thought about it, turning over in his mind a notion that has suddenly struck him. He was wondering just how far he could stretch his luck and it was Jeff Spane, not Fred, he thought of now.

"Well, how about it?" Kirby asked.

All at once Tom made his decision and, glancing across at Kirby's waist, at the .45 riding along his thigh, held out his hand.

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Kirby was a second reading his meaning and then soberly drew the Colt and handed it across.

"Where do we head for?" he asked. And now he had reined his horse to a stand. His look was eager, less bleak than it had been at any time these past four hours.

"I'm not at all sure," Tom told him. "But we'll give Bady's a try."

"Bady's? Hell, man, you can't get to it!"

Tom smiled meagerly. "Lola and I got to it last November."

"How? The road's gone. A man would risk breaking his neck walking up across that shale."

"He would. But he'd risk damn' little coming in from above. Which is how Lola and I got there."

Kirby's eyes had opened wider. Now, swinging his horse on around, he glanced out toward the westward-dipping sun and said crisply, "We've got to move if we make it before dark."

HAD a man been able to scale Sentinel Peak, and had he known what to look for, he would have seen the line Jeff Spane was riding converging with the one Tom and Jim Kirby were taking as certainly as though the meeting between the three had been prearranged. Tom was playing a fairly sure bet. There was one way down off the heights of Sentinel in the direction Spane would be heading, one way only unless a man wanted to ride miles out of the way to the north. And Tom guessed that Spane wouldn't be doing much straying. The direct way led down an unnamed canyon, crossed a bench heavily timbered and dropped from that spruce-fringed rim straight down to Cross D.

Tom had guessed wrong on one thing—the time of day Spane would be doing his traveling. It had been his hope that he and Kirby would meet the rustler on the way out of the notch about sundown. As it was, they were well back along the bench and riding through a thin stand of aspen for the wide mouth of the long canyon falling off the shoulder of Sentinel when suddenly Kirby, peering ahead, asked:

"Who's that?"

Tom's head jerked up. He had been deep in thought. Following Kirby's glance through the trees and up along the wide rocky bed of the canyon he couldn't see anything at first and asked, "Where?"

"There. In behind that oak brush this side of that black ledge. Whoever he is, he doesn't have a saddle."

Kirby had reined in and Tom, stopping his animal, a moment later saw a man on a gray horse ride from behind a thick clump of brush six or seven hundred yards above. At that distance the rider was hard to make out; but the way his legs hung so loosely around the barrel of the gray told him that Kirby had been right; the man was bareback.

That spare shape could belong to no one but Jeff Spane, he decided; and with his pulse suddenly pounding so hard as to make his words thick-tongued, he said, "It's our man."

"Can't be Vance! Not big enough."

"No. It's Spane."

Kirby's glance whipped around. There was a wild light in his eyes as he held out a hand, snapping, "Our bargain was only for Vance." Tom at once understood and drew Kirby's .45 from his belt and offered it. "No, the rifle!" Kirby said quickly.

Lifting his carbine from its scabbard, Tom was trying to hide the vast relief that was coming over him. Kirby was taking everything out of his hands, settling this in a way that would call for no explanations, no curiosity on anyone's part. He was saving Tom the exceedingly risky chore of killing the one man who could betray him.

"God, if only Rita was with him!" Tom breathed now.

"Don't you think about that," Kirby said in a low voice brittle with excitement. He was glancing off through the trees and nodding toward a thick stand of aspen along a slope to his left. "You get yourself out of sight off there. In case he doesn't come straight on out!" And with a quick look in Spane's direction he turned and rode back deeper into the timber, the carbine in his hand.

Tom watched until Kirby was out of sight and then, his eye on Spane, walked his horse on up through the gray-bark aspens a good hundred yards. He stopped there, looking back through the trees trying to spot Kirby and unable to locate him.

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Glancing on toward the mountain once more, he stiffened. For Spane, now riding from the mouth of the broad defile, was angling this way rather than in Kirby's direction. And now that he was closer Tom caught the lopsided way he sat the gray, hunched-over and his right hand pressed to left shoulder. Once when the gray changed stride climbing over some rock Spane swayed precariously and his hand came down and clutched the gray's mane. Tom briefly glimpsed a stain at Spane's shoulder and instantly understood that the man was wounded. Spane was less than a hundred yards away now, sometimes plainly within sight as he rode out of line with individual trees.

IN THOSE next seconds Tom had a decision to make. It was now obvious that Spane, if he continued on his present line, would go on out across the bench without Kirby having a chance at him—unless Kirby moved in toward him, in which case Spane would probably hear and make a break, taking advantage of the heavier timber further out. But he was going to ride within fifty yards of where Tom now waited.

His decision made, Tom turned the bay so that his right side was away from Spane. He slowly drew his Colt and let it hang in his hand. Then, when Spane was almost abreast of him, he put his horse out from the trees at a walk toward the man.

Spane heard the snapping of a dead branch under the bay's hoof and suddenly straightened from his crippled, hunched-over attitude. His sickly gray face swung this way. He saw who it was and the strident alarm etched on his drawn pain-wracked features eased away.

He was even smiling as he turned toward Tom. And now the front of his shirt showed crimson from shoulder to waist. He sat unsteadily on the gray's back. Yet the sight of Tom seemed to give him new strength and he called:

"God, do you look good! Vance put a—"

The lift of Tom's right hand chopped off his words. Stark terror was in his eyes as his good hand made a frantic, wild stab at the gun riding along his thigh.

Kirby, watching all this from two hundred yards away and not at all understanding Spane's strange behavior, saw the rustler's spare frame pounded backward by the roaring blast of Tom's first shot. Spane had managed somehow to lift his gun clear when Tom's second and third bullets drove into his chest. The gray wheeled sharply then and Spane, already dead, fell loosely to the ground as his animal lunged away at a run.

For a long moment Kirby sat awed by the utter viciousness and brutality of the thing he had witnessed. Hating Spane as he did, he was nevertheless dumbfounded at seeing the man, already crippled, killed in such cold blood. He sensed something obscure and underhand in what Tom had done; and as he started across there, thrusting the Winchester into the scabbard, he was almost physically sick.

Some of this feeling of revulsion must have betrayed itself in his look as he rode in on Tom and drew rein, looking down at Spane's loosely-sprawled body; for Tom said lamely:

"You saw him reach for his iron."

"So I did."

Kirby's glance lifted now. It was so chill, so probing, that Tom finally looked away, asking querulously, "Now what's wrong?"

"Nothing." Kirby spoke quietly, his glance still boring in on Tom. "Nothing at all."

"He's changed his last brand, made his last shady deal." Tom was trying to sound bitter, angry, but he sensed that his tone lacked conviction and he added, "He was dead the minute he touched Rita."

Kirby said quietly, "We can't just let him lie here. You pack him on down to your place. I'll keep on and see what luck I have."

"Finding Rita? You won't know where to go if you want to have a look at Bady's."

"You can tell me, can't you?"

Tom was about to protest Kirby's decision, but saw that he could give no logical reason for not doing exactly as Kirby suggested. So, briefly and in much the same way as he had described it to Spane night before last, he told the senator how to get in through the notch and travel the ledge trail to the mine.

Kirby gave him no word of thanks, ventured no opinion when he finally turned and rode away, headed for the canyon-mouth. And Tom, watching him go, knew

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that never again would Jim Kirby look upon him as an honest man.

IT WAS twenty minutes after Spane's headlong flight out along the bench that Rita and Fred rode the same way, Fred using Josh's saddle on Spane's claybank horse that had been staked out with Rita's animal in the timber above. The sun hung low in the west and the hush of late afternoon suited their mood. They were silent as they picked their way up onto the ledge and began traveling it.

When Rita finally did speak Fred sensed that it was only to ease the awkwardness between them. "Spane made me take the lead when we came in along here," she said with a nervous laugh. "He was afraid I'd spoke his horse on over the ledge. I had really thought of trying it."

"Wouldn't be much left of a man if he took that drop."

Fred spoke casually, his thoughts on something else. He was pondering that rare moment by the shaft-house door that had shaken them both so deeply, blaming himself for having given way to his hunger for this girl. Her response still awed him when he thought back upon it, so complete had been her surrender into his arms.

No word had been spoken as they drew away from each other. Yet her eyes had brightly mirrored a blissful ecstacy as she took his hand and started on up through the trees toward the horses. He would never forget that in this moment the one woman he had ever loved had responded in a way that matched his own emotion.

Presently they reached the head of the ledge and rode on into the twilight of the notch where the high walls blocked out day's last strong sunlight; and as they started the climb around the rockslide—slogging, muscle-straining work for their animals—Fred was eyeing the future with a bleakness he had never thought was in him. Even though this trouble would finally be over with, life on Stirrup would be pointless, barren. He might somehow manage to keep from seeing Rita except on rare occasions, but the very fact of her being so close and possessed by another man would be a constant, unbearable torment. He would have to leave, go back to New Mexico or anywhere that would put distance between them. It was senseless to think that he would ever forget her, but at least time and distance would dull the sharp edge of the bitterness and loneliness that was being born in him now.

At the head of the notch they angled on around the face of the peak and presently dropped down along the snaking course of a canyon, the brassy disc of the sun now shining directly in their faces as it topped the jagged western horizon.

The rolling blasts of Tom Demmler's three shots echoed up to them when they were perhaps a mile down along the canyon's depths and Rita turned to Fred then with a faintly alarmed question in her eyes.

"A signal of some kind," he told her. "Probably Sayers. Like this morning after he had his look at me."

She merely nodded at this comment and the few glimpses he had of her face as they rode close together showed him an indrawn, thoughtful expression. He wondered at this but was too deep in his own thoughts to try and account for it.

It was perhaps a quarter hour after the sound of the shots when abruptly she broke the long silence, saying, "Fred, I need your help. It's about Tom."

He was immediately wary and only nodded, not trusting himself to say anything. She sensed his uneasiness and understood it, eyeing him soberly to say with a surprising straightforwardness, "You were thinking of Tom back there. So was I. But it—it would have happened to us regardless of this other, Fred." She reached out and laid a hand on his arm. "Try and believe that."

"Regardless of what other?" was all he could think of to say.

THE toneless quality edging his voice made her draw her hand away. For several seconds she was silent; then when she did speak it was to say miserably, "I don't know how to tell it. All my thinking is so tangled. Now I know how Bill Childers must have felt that night after you'd brought him home. Nothing he had believed in made much sense. Now it's that way when I think of Tom."

"Why should it be?"

She caught that uncompromising, faintly angry edge to his voice and, because it meant so much that he should understand, she

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said deliberately, "It began that morning you and Bill took those shots at Dad and the crew. I was on my way across to see Tom and Lola when I came on Tom and Jeff Spane talking up in the timber along the trail. They hadn't seen me so I rode around them. I thought it would embarrass Tom to have me just ride up on them. Then later he denied having seen Spane. I—" She gave Fred a helpless, pleading look, adding, "I couldn't understand it. I still can't. But he lied to me, Fred. Why?"

He was about to protest her judgment of Tom in the same way he had to Josh last night at the line-shack. But then suddenly and irrevocably he understood that she couldn't be wrong about the man. And now he was remembering Spane's and Rita's denial of Spane having been responsible for those shots at dawn this morning far to the north.

HIS thoughts went quickly back over the past several days, understanding with a terrible and startling clarity certain things that had held no meaning for him until now. It was then that Rita, misreading his silence, spoke again:

"Don't think I haven't thought out what this means, Fred. I've tried my best to see it Tom's way. Of course he would hesitate admitting he ever had anything to do with a man like Spane. But if two people really care for each other shouldn't they share confidences like that?"

Fred only nodded, his thoughts too confused to let him speak. And she went on, "Back there in the tunnel I took a good long look at myself. I began wondering just how much I really cared for Tom. What I knew about his having seen Spane even got me to wondering if he could have had a part in all this—"

The way his glance came around to her now, alert and probing, made her ask, "Was that very wrong of me?"

"No," he replied levelly, checking any further words with the knowledge that the last thing he wanted was to say anything that would influence her now. "Go on," he added.

She lifted her shoulders and smiled faintly, guiltily. "This may be an awful thing to say. But it means everything to me that you should understand. There—there in the mine I finally could face the truth. Regardless of Tom's being honest or dishonest, of his working with Spane or not working with him, I know I don't love him. I never have. Admired him, yes. I've even pitied him and stuck up for him against Dad. But it's never really been love."

All at once now Fred's tiredness lightened. The bitterness and the hopelessness that had been in him were slowly draining away. He felt clean inside, buoyed up by a new hope he didn't quite dare recognize. He asked, "You're sure of this, Rita? Very sure?"

The look she gave him was grave, tender. "Yes, Fred. Very."

"Because there's not going to be any turning back from what's coming."

"And what is coming?" Her voice was hushed, afraid.

At that moment, as he was about to tell her of the things he knew now and hadn't five minutes ago, they both caught a sound shuttling up from below along the canyon. Fred, his hopes and longing alive once more, looked on down the high-walled corridor to see big Jim Kirby riding toward them from around a high rock-shoulder some two hundred yards below.

He said soberly, "Your father. You'd better go on and meet him. I'll wait here." And he reined in.

Rita glanced around at him, her heart in her eyes now. "I think I know what you were going to say," she murmured. "It's about Tom, isn't it?"

He nodded.

"He was the man working with Spane, wasn't he?"

Again Fred nodded.

Rita turned away then. And before she lifted rein to send her horse on away from him, she said very softly, "It's between you and Tom now, isn't it? I will be waiting for you, Fred."

And as she rode on a strong tide of sober happiness rushed in to submerge every other emotion in Fred Vance's being.

THE deepening twilight seemed to bring with it a strengthening gloom over Tom Demmler's thoughts. He would never forget his meeting with Lola there at the wagon-shed as he was unroping Spane's body from the gray's back.

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She had surprised him—before leading the gray down he had gone to the cabin and found it empty—by suddenly riding it out of the trees behind the barn. There was no time to get the gray and its grisly burden in out of sight even though it was almost dark. She had seen him and ridden quickly over, saying excitedly:

"Tom, I've found Fred and you'll—"

She had seen the body then and choked off her words with a small cry of alarm. Then, silently, she put her horse in closer to the gray. She recognized Spane and fixed on Tom a wide-eyed look of disbelief. "You—you did this?"

"Who else?"

"And where's Rita?"

He shook his head. "She wasn't with him. Kirby's gone on to look for her."

A strange change came to her then. Her eyes were all at once alight with hate and she breathed in a tone of utter contempt, "You needn't tell me how it happened. I know. You murdered him! You're lost now, Tom. Absolutely lost! I—I'm leaving you. For good."

She turned her animal out from him and as a sudden rage struck him he reached out and snatched at her reins, drawling, "Not till you tell me what you mean! Why 'lost'?"

Instead of answering she lashed out with the rein-ends, striking at his face so that he instinctively let go his hold and lifted his hands. She touched her animal with the spur then and rode on out of his reach, straight up across the yard to the porch. And a strange paralysis held him where he was, cautioning him against following her. He knew without being told what she must be thinking; that she had jumped to her own conclusions at sight of Spane's body, that she had her answers to the many questions she must have asked herself over the past several days. And he had no wish to face her now and hear how closely she might have come to guessing the truth about him.

He was undecided as to what to do now, whether to finish unroping Spane's body and leave it here in the wagon-shed until Kirby arrived or take it on in to town. It was the thought of Kirby possibly finding Rita and bringing her down here that finally decided him, and he unknotted the rope and went ahead with his work.

Spane's body was already stiffening and made an awkward load as he lifted it down and carried it in through the dark maw of the wagon-shed. He found some potato sacks in the feed bin and waited until he had covered the body with them before going over to grope in the dark trying to find the lantern that should be hanging from one of the harness nails.

He had barely lit the lantern when he caught soft hoof-falls sounding up from the direction of the corral. He decided that it was more than one horse and as the thought struck him, *He's found her!* he stepped over to the door and outside, the lantern in his hand.

The shapes of two riders came slowly in out of the darkness toward him. Jim Kirby was in the lead, Rita following him closely. Then, as he smiled broadly and was about to call out, he made out another indistinct shape behind Rita.

He saw Fred come on into the light astride Spane's claybank. In pure surprise he breathed, "Good Lord, all of you!" Then he found the presence of mind to play his part, adding, "Rita, are you all right?"

He didn't begin to understand what happened then, the way Rita glanced down at him so aloofly, the stern set of Jim Kirby's square face, the deliberateness of Fred's climbing down from the saddle and stepping toward him. He set the lantern down and tried to keep down the panic building in him, laughing and saying uneasily, "You're sure a sober bunch."

Kirby glanced around at Fred, asking tonelessly, "Do Rita and I stay, Vance?"

Fred only nodded, his glance not straying from Tom as he stopped several strides away. Then abruptly he was saying, "Tom, someone winged me up there in the hills to the north this morning. It wasn't Spane."

Tom felt the blood draining from his face. Yet now when he needed it most his nerve came back and he blandly asked, "Then who was it?"

"You, Tom."

Tom gave a visible start. And over the next several seconds he gauged his chances and found them slim. Fred's high frame was tensed, the fingers of his right hand clawed slightly as though he was ready to lift it to the gun thrust through his belt. Tom could sense the antagonism in Rita and Kirby and, though he didn't know how much they had

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guessed, he sensed that this was one of the most dangerous moments he had ever lived.

Now once again his courage strengthened unaccountably and let him put a slack expression of bewilderment on his face. "What? Me?"—He laughed hollowly—"Friend, what are you saying?"

"In the beginning it was Milt Hurd," Fred stated quietly. "Because you knew he would never have signed your lease. Then you offered to hire Spane for me probably because you were already in with him on something. Kirby says cattle have gone through that north fence. Maybe you could tell us how they—"

"I can tell you, Fred!"

Lola's voice, speaking from the shadows, startled them all. Fred glanced briefly at her as she moved on into the light; then his eyes swivelled back to Tom again.

"Tom and Spane drove those cattle off Stirrup," Lola went on now, looking at Tom accusingly. She was pale and her expression was lifeless, burned out. "But none of the rest of the things you're saying are true. Tom may have stolen catle, but he isn't a killer."—Now her glance swung around to Fred—"Think, Fred," she said in a barely audible voice—"Think what you're saying! He's your friend. He's stuck with you when all the others have turned—"

"No, Lola," Fred's quiet drawl cut across her words. "That's what I'd give anything to think. But it doesn't add up."—His attention had strayed from Tom now—"Spane couldn't have thought of taking Rita. He didn't have the nerve for it. And you said yourself that you and Tom were probably the only ones who'd ever got in to Bady's since the road went—"

Tom lunged, the thin hold on his panic suddenly giving way, driving him to violence. At the limit of his vision Fred caught that move and swung around at the instant Tom kicked the lantern over and lunged away in the blackness.

Rita cried out as Fred was lifting hand to belt. For a fraction of a second that last glimpse he'd had of Tom hung on in Fred's consciousness. He saw the man's solid frame bent over in that lunge, saw him drawing the gun at his thigh.

And in that instant he threw his body sharply sideways, his move barely begun before a rosy stab of flame was lancing at him out of the darkness in accompaniment to a blasting explosion. A vast regret surged through him as he lifted his gun, lined it and squeezed the trigger. Over the throaty roar of the .45 he sensed that his bullet had gone home. He fired again, hearing Tom's hoarse scream as an after-echo of the concussion.

He took one more sideward step and across the sudden stillness there sounded the hoarse rattle of Tom's breathing. Off there Fred thought he could make out his friend's shape, then decided his eyes were deceiving him. But the next moment when that shape slowly melted groundward, and there came the dull pound of Tom's fall, he knew he wasn't mistaken.

A choked sob of Lola's finally broke that strained silence and Fred heard her run past him, indistinctly saw her kneel there beside her brother. He was turning away when she said softly, lifelessly, "He's gone."

Kirby, afoot now, struck a match and came walking over and Fred was watching him go to his knees beside Lola, putting an arm about her shoulders, when all at once he sensed that Rita was close beside him.

Her hand nestled in the bend of his elbow, its pressure guiding him on away. They had taken several steps off into the darkness before he realized that he still gripped the Colt. He dropped it and the thud of its falling seemed to strike a note of finality to this terrible moment.

Rita stopped finally and stood close in front of him, looking up at him. He said brokenly, "If—if only we'd been by ourselves this—"

She put a finger to his lips, softly saying, "It had to be, Fred. Do you remember telling me there was to be no turning back?"

He nodded mutely and took her hand in his. Then, tenderly, she murmured, "So we won't turn back. 'We', Fred! Think what that means!"

And from the depths of his being there rose a humble thankfulness that thinned the sadness and regret and let him know that one day this dark hour would be forgotten.

THE END

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KNOW YOUR SPORT

By R. W. DALY

THE guy was tall and broad-shouldered and handsome in the way Hollywood had persuaded the country a man should be. The height was his own and there wasn't much padding in his tweed jacket. He sat at the bar carelessly twisting a beer can with his long powerful fingers. Pete the bartender treated him like a stranger and Pete knew everybody in our little town.

Having an hour or so to shoot before picking up Winnie—we were both going to Lucy and Frank Hawkins' for a game of bridge—I was forgetting the harrowing experience of pointing out to one of our assured—I am in the insurance business—that throwing an irritating door-to-door salesman down the front steps did not properly come within the scope of an accident policy. I only wanted to insulate my nerves with a peaceful shot or two. The stranger thought I was the answer to his loneliness in a town which had only one movie and no pickups, and he moved over next to me, determined not to be ignored.

He said he was a sales representative for a concern in the city about ninety miles

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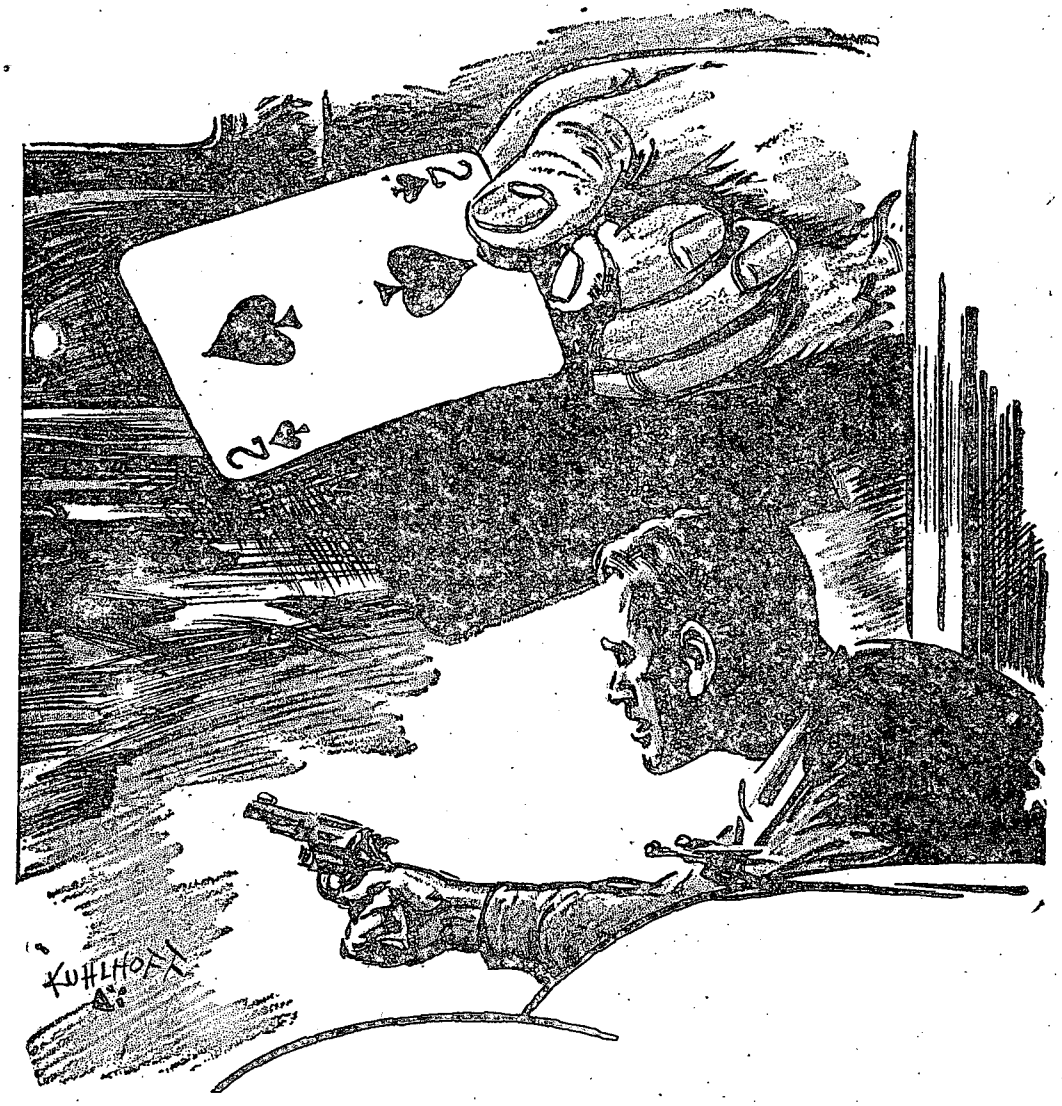
". . . and All We Started Out to Do Was Have a Friendly Game of Bridge With the Sheriff and His Wife!"



south of us. Thinking maybe he might be calling on my own hot-tempered customer, it seemed like good business to be curtly cordial to him before we met more formally at the hospital. His name was Ed Simmons, which meant nothing to me, but my name of Henry Macdonald apparently meant something to talk about to him.

"Not the Macdonald who found that politician in the swamp a couple of weeks ago?" he asked, with a hint that he wanted the complete inside story.

That called for a double bourbon. Finding a guy named Whitlock all messed up by buckshot and the subsequent ratrace with his killers was something that I had consistently been trying to shove down into that part of my brain which worked after midnight. "Yeah," I said. "Think the Navy's got the team to take Army this year?"

Simmons ignored the hint to drop the subject. He was blond and the big, economy-size man, and when he wanted to talk about something, he was apparently used to having people oblige him. Such guys are slow to learn that after a certain point, size doesn't matter much, but I wasn't in the mood to take him out in back to educate

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him. "Tell me about it," he said, patronizingly.

I glanced at the clock. It was a little early to call for Winnie, yet I didn't want to be reminded that the Black Deuce mob who had killed this Whitlock had been thereby stopped cold in their tracks on their way towards taking over the city again like the good old days before the war. I had been very much involved, and as maybe the city cops hadn't nabbed all the hangers on, I was scared. The Germans hadn't been able to put me under a neat white cross, and it wasn't patriotic enough to view with delight the prospect of having the grave dug for me by a homegrown product who had sat out the war in some pen.

"Gotta go," I said, scrabbling for my change on the slick-wet bar. "Be seeing you."

"Look," he said indulgently. "If you don't want to talk about it, Macdonald, that's O.K. with me. Guess you must have had a rugged time and want to forget it."

HE WAS exactly right but I didn't care for his ironic sympathy. He put one of his can-crushing hands on my shoulder, and looked at me with a grin. Right then I knew that nerveless Eddie was one of those naturally athletic bums with a heart murmur or slipped cartilages or ingrown toenails that the Army hadn't been able to use. No guy who got spasmodically shot at ever viewed with contempt other guys who showed a distaste for sudden death.

I don't like hands on my shoulder and removed his without apology, forebearing to crush in a nerve. "You're on the beam. I don't want to discuss it."

"O.K.," he said amiably. "So the Navy'll take the Army. Come on, I'll buy you a drink."

It was his out-size tolerance that made me reach onto the bar for a beer can. The grandstand trick was simple; you just press on the ends of the seam. When the can was bent in half, I handed it to him as a reminder that other six-foot characters had biceps, too. "See you later."

"See you around, Mac," he said, and his blue eyes were amused. He may have been thirty, but he hadn't outgrown the kid's confidence that the world was his oyster. He got under my skin.

Out in my car, I glanced back at the bar window. He was sitting on his stool straightening out the can I had handed him. That was a trick I didn't know. I was a bit mad. The last few days, I had more or less got over the feeling there were bound to be some consequences from my meeting with the Black Deuce lads. Now it was back again. Before stepping on the starter, and feeling as silly as a boy caught by the gang walking his girl home, I got out, and looked under the hood for any bits of equipment that shouldn't have been there.

It was stupid, sure. My car was parked on the main shopping thoroughfare of our bustling submetropolis, and anybody planting a switch charge would have been swamped by a dozen friends of mine. It was stupid, but I was compelled to do it. That's how far you go when you're a peace-loving character and have the idea there are some tough boys looking for you.

I got back in the car, glanced at the bar window, and there was Simmons grinning out at me. He waved the mashed beer can. I almost went back in to introduce him to a mixture of judo and a hundred and eighty pound right hook. No one likes to be caught showing fear, much less being reminded of it, and I knew that the mob had been chased to cover, with time to brood about the guy who had upset a clean job of homicide and thereby loused up their plans to make Whitlock's murder a simple warning they were in business and not to be fooled with. Unhappily for them, the two punks who had been liquidated in the deal had what are called incriminating papers on their persons. Unhappily for me, I had been the direct cause of the liquidation.

Driving up the steep lift into the hills above the town and easing into the long hairpin curve into the woods, it occurred to me that big fun-loving Ed Simmons was probably blasting my reputation in the bar. Then the necessity of keeping a careful eye on the county highway threading through the forest got rid of his grinning face.

I was still uneasy.

Business and pleasure had brought me out on that road countless times, and I could go fast, because the swooping turns didn't hold any surprises for me, yet I almost drove off the road when a car popped into my rear-vision mirror on an occasional

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straightaway. I tightened up like an office boy asking for a raise. The car kept a steady distance and worried me until I took the turn on to the gravel trail leading to the Andersons' place. The car droned by. Listening, I thought it slowed down almost to a stop as if to give the driver a chance to get a good look at the Anderson road.

I DROVE the next two miles at about ten miles an hour, because rain and frost and neglect had reduced the trail to little more than ruts that gripped the wheels and led the car inexorably around all the turns. Pine branches rustled into the windshield and over the turtleback top of my coupe. Bushes scraped the hubcaps. I was glad when I got to the clearing where the Anderson hunting lodge lifted its logs invitingly.

When I walked into Winnie's, everything was fine again.

She wore a housecoat and had a fire going in the big living room. There was ice and a bottle of my brand of bourbon on a coffee table in front of the sofa, Dr. Anderson was busy with his test tubes, and her makeup was obviously in the preliminary stage where repairs could easily be made. She assured me that I wasn't too early. After a while, an officious mantel clock said it was time to get ready to leave, so she went in to her mirror and war paint and I paid attention to the whiskey.

Winnie was perfect. She was brunette with wide blue eyes and had had the voltage of a cyclotron loaded into five feet five inches of harmonious lines, parabolas and curves. As soon as the Farmers' Mutual learned what constituted a living wage in the antebellum world, I was going to eliminate the forty-minute drive to be with her. Unfortunately, Dr. Anderson had long since reached the top of his profession and hated to be bothered figuring out what to do with some fifty thousand bucks a year and Winnie was used to a way of life that the Europeans wistfully thought was representative of all Americans.

She swished into the room and paused at the fireplace for my rude appreciation. "Like it?" she asked, patting her upswept hair.

"Beautiful," I mumbled, which was both a true and a safe comment, taking in everything from the snug black dinner dress to the hairdo. From time to time, something changed, which I was expected to observe, but I had long since lapsed into a habit of being noncommittal. Winnie always looked as though she had a new dress and hat on, which wasn't strange, because she probably always did.

She must have thought my comment inadequate, because once we were out in the car, she asked pointedly, "What's the matter, darling?"

"Matter?" I flipped on the headlights and drove back the frightening darkness. "Nothing's the matter, sweetheart."

"All right, Hank," she said quietly, to make it clear she thought she was overlooking a lie, and then moved over so it wasn't chilly in the car before the heater warmed up. I cursed my jitters silently.

There wasn't anything specific to worry about, yet creeping along that desolate track, I was half afraid that a bogeyman would leap out of the bushes. When we turned onto the county highway, I almost shuddered as the lights of a car abruptly glared behind us. I kept looking back in the mirror, not knowing what I'd find, but not wanting that guy to be back there. A cat had every right in the world to appear and then hang on, if only because it wasn't too safe to pass at night along that road, and I was going fast enough to suit practically anybody. For years others cars had followed me or I had followed them until we reached the hairpin curve and the road opened out into the valley straightaway.

Even so, I fluffed my end of the conversation until Winnie silently turned on the radio. Usually the things we had to say to each other were too important to be interfered with even by music, but I was glad it was on, because the syncopated racket kept her ostensibly amused.

ALTHOUGH I didn't chip my teeth like Noel Coward or Cary Grant, Winnie didn't move away. She didn't quite understand and she was a little hurt, but Winnie wasn't going to break off diplomatic relations just because of a silent spell. That was why I wanted her. No nagging.

If I had tried to explain, it would have been straight out of East Lynne—"I'm afraid they're going to get me." It was vague, one of those fears that trot a guy along to the soothing voices and the shock treatment.

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The words were there, but I was a grown man, with a reputation for a good, solid right and a war record of respectable survival. Had I put it in those words, Winnie wouldn't have curled her lovely, full lips in cold contempt. She'd just try to talk me out of it, and the next time I'd see her, some of those whistling curves would be gone, and her face would have the hollows that showed in all the photographs until after V-J Day.

Anyway, I had been educated to live with the jitters. That was about the only good thing the Tiger tanks taught us in the days when our Shermans were proving as helpful as Spam against the 88s. Things had usually worked out and worry hadn't helped much. So I didn't try to tell her. She could choose to believe I was disgruntled as usual because the Farmers' Mutual didn't think I had put enough time into the company to rate a marrying salary.

Then the guy in the car behind decided that fifty miles an hour was pokey. Coming into a short straight stretch, he gave me the horn and zipped by like a hot rodder. His passing took some of the edge off my tension. His taillight winked around a turn ahead, but before I gathered up enough good cheer to make a beachhead against Winnie's detachment, another car unobtrusively slipped onto our tail, taking station at almost the same distance. If we didn't live in a pleasant, peaceful community, I would have thought we were boxed in.

Nothing happened.

The new tailer kept a steady interval between us and the car ahead disappeared. Still, wanting unconsciously to shake the guy loose, I kept building up speed and our tires started to screech at the turns.

"Hadn't you better slow down a little?" Winnie finally said mildly.

We were doing over sixty and coming to the hairpin curve on the big hill going down to town. Thirty was the absolute limit of safety. Despite all the signs, plenty of out-of-state drivers as well as local boys had whipped through the wired railings. Some had gone through and ended a few hundred feet below in the brook that had once been a huge river pouring onto the plain; others were lucky and didn't break through the heavy wires.

"Sure," I said, and took my foot off the accelerator, braking so we barely leaned into the curve.

That exaggerated desire to please her was all that kept us from bathing out of season. The wheel suddenly jerked in my hands and the car flew to the right to the accompaniment of two detonations. We hit the wire before I could do anything about where we were going. The steel twanged and casually threw us back onto the road. It was over in a few seconds.

THE first thing I wondered about was why the hot rodder hadn't had the same accident; the railing was intact. At the back of my brain, I knew it wasn't in the nature of an act of God. We hadn't been going fast enough to blow out two tires.

Winnie glared up at me from a cramped position on the floor and she was mad, so I knew she hadn't been bopped into a concussion of serious consequences. The jolt hadn't been deadly, but if the tires had blown at the speed I usually took that turn, Winnie wouldn't have been pressing her lips together while her little cocktail hat hung over one ear.

"Hurt, sweetheart?" I asked stupidly, trying to be tender about helping her up.

She wriggled away from my hands and managed to get on the seat, snapping, "Let go of me! When are you going to stop driving a tank?"

The radio was impervious to mere collisions with wire fences, but it didn't seem like the proper setting for a passionate ditty about two alone on a desert isle, so I switched it off. Winnie clicked on the car dome light, turned the rear-vision mirror towards her disheveled head, and grimly started to comb her hair. The November night became extremely nippy.

I got out. The right fender and headlight were a shambles and both right tires were flat. That was odd. The turn was to the left, and the heavier strain should have been on the left tires. I looked back, as the car behind stopped so that I could only see one headlight. My blood dove for my shoes so it would go spattering around from holes in the belly, but the way I felt in the middle, a mere bullet couldn't even dent me.

"Need a wrench," I said to Winnie, and reached into the glove compartment. Fortu-

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nately, she was haughtily preoccupied, and didn't notice the kind of wrench I was after. I slipped the S. & W. .38 into my coat pocket, and put on my flashlight. The front tire had a lot of shiny nails in it. So did the rear one.

Even without Winnie's being mad, the road would have been very unfriendly. The fears of two weeks came into one big lump. I carefully looked at the wire fence. It was unquestionably intact. The hot rodder had laid the minefield and now his buddy had come along to check up. I glanced in at Winnie, whispered a tentative good-bye, and started towards the rear, holding the flashlight at arm's length to my left to entice stray shots away from my coupe, which was foolish, because I was as conspicuous as Santa Claus in a department store before Christmas.

The .38 was cocked but I kept it in my pocket, because there was a slim chance the guy behind was an innocent victim. I didn't think so, but there was that chance. I didn't feel brave, sidling back there. I went because it was the only thing to do. If there was going to be a shotgun blast or the chatter of a Tommy gun, I wanted Winnie to be out of the line of fire.

THE road was lighted with the beams pointing off the road towards the twinkling town a few miles below. There wasn't anybody standing out there waiting for me. I didn't expect them to be. As long as I walked towards them, even timidly, that was all the better for what they had in mind.

Then I stopped. There was a car zooming up the hill from the valley. I ran across the road to flag him down, and saw to my delight that if my friends wanted to get me first, they'd be silhouetted against their own beams. When headlights swept up the turn and hit me, I put on my flash and waved desperately. The car passed my coupe and braked to a halt before running over me. A great big character stepped out and said in a recently familiar voice, "Having trouble, Mac?"

It was Ed Simmons. I was charmed to renew even his acquaintance and grinned back at his big, grinning face. "Yeah. A couple of flat tires."

"Too bad," he replied. "That's a pretty babe you've got."

I almost put my hand back into my pocket. Maybe I didn't have any legal right to be jealous, but Winnie was as much a part of me as the nose that was broken in a high-school debate. Simmons made a specialty of rubbing me the wrong way. "She's got false teeth," I said. "She's the state wrestling champ in the heavy division."

"No kiddin'? Want me to give you a lift?"

"First, I'd like to look at that car back there. I think the guy wants trouble."

"Just a minute," he said, went down to his car and put a spotlight on so that we didn't need the flashlight when he came back.

"You stay here," I said. "There might be fireworks."

"Let's go."

"You don't get me. I mean shooting."

He grinned at me. "The Black Deuce gang? Swell! Let's go!" He looked tough and I knew he could lick his weight in beer cans, so I didn't object further or suggest that the light was unnecessary, because it would show us as well as them. Then it occurred to me they'd shoot for him first anyway, just to sight in.

"Flop down if it starts."

He spat in the road.

"O.K.," I said. "Let's go." Maybe it would give him a healthy respect for something besides brawn. I glanced down at gleaming tenpenny nails strung out in a careful pattern a few feet in from the right-hand side of the road. Even with Simmons lumbering along, my arteries didn't unknot. They were going to a lot of trouble for my sake.

A heavy, square-shouldered man stepped quickly into the spotlight. Before I squeezed the trigger, I noticed the guy was carrying a car jack, and I recognized Bill Rainey's baritone, when he said, "Oh, it's you, Hank! I was just coming down to give you a hand. Couldn't find the damn jack."

"Yeah, it's me," I said weakly, taking my hand out of my pocket and staying on my feet only because Simmons was watching. "Somebody's been strewing nails around here. Don't you guys have a law about that?"

"Nails?" he asked, with a rising inflection. "Why, if you hadn't hit 'em first, it would have been me!"

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Simmons thought it was funny.

"Look," I said. "I'm going to see your boss for supper, Bill. How about taking us in?"

Deputy Sheriff Rainey thought it over for a minute and decided to be a Good Samaritan. "Let's clean up the road first," he suggested.

"Look, Mac," Simmons said affably. "I'd be glad to take you in. In fact—"

"Don't bother," Rainey interrupted. "It's on my way and obviously out of yours."

Simmons shrugged. "Just trying to meet a lady," he said. "Isn't every day you get a chance to match grips with a lady rassler. Be seein' you around, Mac." He walked back to his car.

"Come here, Hank!" Rainey said urgently. Puzzled, I went with him quickly to his parked sedan. We stood outboard by the fence so the car's thin armoring separated us from Simmons as he swept by and beeped his horn. Then he disappeared, spotlight and all.

"What's the big idea?" I asked.

"Let's put it this way," Rainey replied, starting off down the road. "Did you see the number on the car that passed you about ten minutes ago?"

"He went by too fast."

"Yeah. Because he spotted me tailing him. Well, now," Rainey drawled, kicking at the nails, "his license plates bore a curious resemblance to those of your chum."

"Simmons?" I stopped in my tracks. "You mean it was Simmons?"

"That's the general idea," Rainey admitted. "He seems like a decent guy at heart. I think he came back to get the nails off the road before too many cars went down the hill."

"You mean Simmons?"

"Yep. Even with your babe nearby, he would have chopped you down when he drove up, except there wasn't any way for him to get away from me, and he wanted to do a clean job. Come on, now, let's get Winnie. I want to use a telephone." He jerked his head towards his car. "We've been tipped off they know our radio frequency. They had some organization."

DRIVING down into town, I didn't have very much to say, even when Rainey kidded Winnie about being described as a lady rassler. The prospect of her later eruption didn't chill me as much as the knowledge that my uneasiness of the last two weeks had been focussed into the person of that grinning hulk. Simmons apparently had the merit of being a moron capable of only one thought at a time. He was supposed to bump me off, and he'd keep trying, one way after another, patiently like an idiot, until he seemed to have succeeded or failed.

It was obvious that Rainey hadn't appeared by accident. Perhaps I should have resented being wet-nursed. I didn't. It was fine. I wondered how long he had been hovering around me, and why, if he knew Simmons, he hadn't just grabbed the guy when we had him between us.

As we got out of the car in front of Frank's, I hung back for a minute to get a quick answer to that question. "Why didn't you take him back there?"

Bill fiddled with the gear shift. "He had a pal in the car with him," he said embarrassedly, as though my question was a criticism. "I didn't mind being spotlighted, but Frank gave the word to be careful. He likes Winnie."

"Hurry up!" she ordered curtly. "I'll give you one fall and take the other two without getting my gloves dirty!"

"Come out fighting," Rainey smiled, and zoomed away to the sheriff's office.

"Look, baby," I began. "You know I was only—"

"—Just wait!" she slashed in, and that was that. I followed her trim figure to the door, and the way she held her chin, it was apparent to Frank and Lucy that they were witnessing the termination of a love greater than death.

While Winnie swept in with Lucy to talk over those things that keep women happy during those mysterious hours they spend in powder rooms, Frank took my coat, patting the pockets before putting it on a hanger. "When did you get in the habit of carrying a flashlight and a negotiable insurance policy?" he asked calmly.

I told him about the flat tires.

He didn't seem very surprised, and mixed me a drink to keep me talking. Frank was young to be a sheriff, even in a little county like ours, though the voters were pleased, despite the laxness of the postwar years that

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had produced a minor crime wave that Wild Bill Hickock would have enjoyed.

"Rainey's been with you for almost a week," he said. "Hope you don't mind."

If that was a reflection on my manhood, I didn't mind a bit. In fact, it made me feel a little better in more ways than one. I hadn't been just coming down with a case of the jitters; cars had actually been following me. "What will the taxpayers say?"

"You pay taxes. I didn't want you to worry, so I didn't warn you."

"That's fine. My nerves are as tight as a supply officer paying his own bills."

"We haven't got a clear line on this Simmons. Rainey couldn't place him or his accomplice. From what you say, they're our men. It seems to me there's a big jerk named Ed something who was trying to work into the Black Deuce outfit a while back. They tossed him out because he was too gutless. Maybe this is a prestige job for him."

The notion of being a passport into the gravy train of mobdom for a minnow who wanted to be a shark wasn't flattering. Frank looked completely unconcerned, but little pictures were doing handstands at the back of my mind. It was O.K. for him to be casual; he hadn't watched Simmons squeeze beer cans.

DESPITE my fruit salad, I'm not a hero. I'd be scared if a midget was hunting for me with homicidal intentions; the size of Simmons only made me more nervous. Frank and Bill had to sleep sometimes and opportunity was a golden girl that Simmons would know how to woo. The more I thought about the nails in the road, the less I liked them. That could have been gruesome.

The girls came back. We chatted about nothing and finally got out the bridge table, men against the women. Humorously or otherwise, Winnie played for blood. She was usually polite about showing people how much smarter she was than her fiancé, and Lucy gave me a few quick glances to see if I understood that the condition was only temporary.

It was clear, all right. Winnie would have put up with any other disparaging crack, but telling Simmons she was a wrestler threw an intolerable aspersion at the figure of which we both were so proud. You never know. Maybe she had gained a couple of pounds and was sensitive; she did look a wee bit more delicious. She caught me staring at the black dress and when I looked up, she had on a scowl that foreshadowed a chilly ride home.

When Frank went away to answer the phone, Winnie ignored me to talk to Lucy. It was uncomfortable and I didn't feel better when Frank came back to sit down with a thoughtful expression quite detached from the presumed gaiety of the evening.

The next hand, having the ace, king, queen of hearts and a few other good cards and a lousy attitude, I tried to cut off Winnie's cool bidding up to four spades, and then, without any encouragement from Frank, rashly doubled to be calmly redoubled. I had the lead and snapped down the ace of hearts. Lucy showed the dummy and was blank in my strong suit. Winnie smiled triumphantly and picked up the trump two-spot.

"There's nothing I like better than to trump an ace with this little fellow," she said smugly.

Frank looked across at me. "That Black Deuce seems to be pretty strong, partner," he remarked casually, "but we'll take a trick or two."

I ALMOST dropped under the card table. So that was the phone call! Frank was now sure. The nails weren't accidental, Simmons was a would-be torpedo, and the future was about as happy as my current relations with Winnie. The rest of the game went on without me, and by the end, the girls had piled up a score we could never cut down. Winnie lifted her head like Queen Elizabeth sending Essex to the Tower, and went out to the kitchen with Lucy to get the sandwiches and coffee.

"Listen," Frank said quickly. "We think they're on Anderson's road, or maybe near your place, so you two had better stay here tonight. I'll drive her back in the morning."

It was the safe thing to do. Until the big monkey and his chum were picked up, nights were dangerous. Frank's small one-storey bungalow had never before seemed so hospitable, and it had three bedrooms, and it would be respectable. Still, I hated like hell to spring the dramatic stuff on Winnie.

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On the face of things, I was husky enough to be Frank's guardian angel, instead of the other way around.

He saw my hesitation. "Leave it to me," he said.

"I don't think he'll make another stab tonight. He'll lie quiet for a while. After all, he must know I'm on to him after—"

"He's a punk," Frank interrupted. "I doubt if he knows any better. Don't worry. I won't kill your grease with Winnie. Leave it to me."

So, having become a good working model of the new-type mouse, I left it to Frank. We finished the sandwiches and coffee, shot the breeze until well after midnight, and then Frank went to get his car out of the garage, having politely offered to lend it to me. Now that the party was over, Winnie showed signs of wanting to make peace, and I was disappointed when Frank came in and sadly said that his car wouldn't start.

"I told you to have the battery checked!" Lucy snapped. "Why didn't you take care of it?"

"Getting sloppy, I guess," Frank replied meekly. "Think we can take these people in out of the storm?"

Lucy cut him down with a glance as hot as The Bomb's flash. "Call your father," she said to Winnie. "You can sleep with me and we can discuss that useless creature, man."

While Winnie got Dr. Anderson out of bed to tell him about the results of my speeding around the hairpin turn and Frank's disobedience of wifely orders, Lucy made a gesture to evict me from the house.

"A two-mile walk will do you good," she said, going to the closet for my things. Frank shook his head, no longer the mild husband. Lucy looked puzzled for a moment, got the idea that something was in the air, and then her face slowly developed a woebegone expression because she had rashly debarred him from their bedroom, and she couldn't torture the story out of him until the next day.

After the women left us to the bottle, Frank said, "Rainey'll be by for me in an hour. Keep your fingers crossed. We should have this cleared up by dawn."

"I'll tag along."

"You stay here."

"I'd rather go."

"Just a minute," Frank said. "I know you've got the stuff. We think we've got 'em figured, but we might be wrong. I'd like to have someone in the house here, just in case."

"O.K. You stay. I'll go."

"Suppose you shut up before I get out the cuffs," he said crisply, as though he was briefing his Thunderbolt squadron again. That was that, whether I liked it or not. He was concerned for my safety and if I obstructed his preparations, he was capable of hauling me down to his two-by-four jail until he had tracked down Simmons. Even if I felt foolish staying home with the women, while he went off to the wars, he'd have his way.

"Y' know, if you get perforated, I could never—"

"Shut up!" he snapped. "This is my job! I don't tell you about the insurance racket. To me, you're just a taxpayer on a spot."

"Sure, but—"

"If it makes you feel any better, the state cops are in with us. O.K.?"

I SAT and talked with him until Rainey discreetly rapped on the door. Frank got a Tommy gun out of a cabinet. I walked to the street with them.

"They aren't near Hank's place," Rainey said. "I just checked."

Frank looked up and down the street. His house was in the middle of the block which was made up of modest lots about three by four hundred feet. The high, old-fashioned lights at the corners barely reached us. "You know where they are, then," he said. "Is Slattery set?"

"Yeah. He's been in there since midnight."

"Frequency changed?"

"Yeah."

"Let's go." Frank held out a hand. "Wish us luck, boy. When you're sure the gals are sound asleep, you might call Winnie's father and tell him not to worry if he hears anything."

"Think they're in there, eh?"

"Sure. I'll lay you ten to one the chumps cut down a tree after we drive in. Take it?"

"That'll be rugged in there. I'd better go—"

"He got the Silver Star," Frank said to Rainey. "Can't forget it. Listen. If you're

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worried, sit up, muffle the phone, and I'll call you first thing. Why don't you go to bed?"

"You mean sleep?"

"Why not?" he yawned. "It's late. Well, keep your tail up!"

I watched them creep quietly away and then strolled back to the house to brood. In the bedroom to the rear none too gentle snoring announced that the ladies had completed their vivisection, so I called Dr. Anderson. He thanked me for the warning that the next war was about to break over his head, said that a Sergeant Slattery had already informed him of the same impending jamboree, and grumpily went back to his pad.

It was very lonely. I felt about as useless as a letter of recommendation and as vicious as a new-born guppy. The cozy living room grew chilly and not only because the thermostat was down. I made myself a weak drink, turned off all the lights and sat next to a front window.

Frank and Bill would have to go a half hour more to get to Winnie's. Their strategy seemed simple. They'd pretend to be taking her home, then put about, Frank slumped out of sight, until they reached whatever pocket Simmons had devised. I didn't exactly see what angle the state cops were going to cover. All I saw was flashes in the night and a lot of blood.

And I wouldn't be there.

TIME fled with the speed of a kid making a selection at a candy counter. After a while I stopped looking at my watch. That wasn't making things move faster. The liquor wasn't having any effect, either, so I took the next one neat. Frank and I had been in grammar school together. He was always a runt. I fought more than one battle for him; it didn't make sense that he should be taking chances for me.

So what, if my nerves were shot? I had been waiting in the corridor of the booby hatch at what they called a rest camp when the Battle of the Bulge opened up and every tanker was needed. I got through that all right; my nerves steadied down when they had to. Frank should have let me tag along. I knew Winnie's road inside out.

And then, all of a sudden, my skin crawled. Why would Simmons be out there? Simmons knew where I was! I had told him in front of Rainey! "I'm going to see your boss for supper, Bill," I had said, and even a clunkhead like Simmons could have seen the police aerial on Bill's car and put two and two together to get Frank's address. Simmons was probably hugging one of the houses across the street, waiting his time to come over and do his job.

Could Simmons possibly have a better way to get a name for himself than knocking over a guy who was sleeping in a sheriff's bed? I got out of that chair and into the first bedroom before I even realized why my feet carried me there. I put on the overhead light, whose brightness flooded out onto the lawn at the side.

Stretching lazily, I looked at the books on the guest table, picked one up, flipped through the pages, and then sat down on one of those frilly, stiff-backed boudoir chairs. I let my head sink lower and lower, then got up to get a chair to rest my feet on, and returned to the chair.

Anybody looking in from the outside would have the idea they were watching a bored character killing time, and all he would see would be the top of my head. I sat there for a few minutes, hunched expectantly for a shotgun blast, but if Simmons caught my act, he didn't get on stage in time.

It was corny, but Simmons was corny, too, and the gag might work. When enough time had passed for him to slip around to observe what was going on in a house that had been dark and then abruptly lighted in one room, I got up again, took off my coat and tie, glanced out the window for a moment and then pulled down the shades. Simmons could still see my shadow. I wanted him to.

Going to the bed, I flattened against the wall, plucked a pillow off the bed, and used my tie to round it into the facsimile of a head. Then I carefully put it on the floor, kicked it over to the chair, ostentatiously dragged the night table over to the other corner, plugged in the lamp, and put the chair so that its back scarcely had a shadow thrown onto the shade. Then I turned off the overhead light, picked up the book, and settled in the chair, so that the light threw an outline of my skull onto the shade.

Slowly enough to be imperceptible, I

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moved in the chair until my head no longer showed on the shade. Then I slipped down to the floor, carefully propped the pillow so that just an inch or so showed above the top of the chair's shadow, and crawled on my hands and knees out of the room.

It was corny as a radio program, and therefore I hoped Simmons would fall for it. Even if he didn't, he'd be a fool to start trouble before he took a gander at that lighted bedroom. I meant to be on hand when he did.

Out in the hall, I got up on my feet. It was funny, but my nerves were steady. Maybe that snoring in the bedroom two doors down had a tonic effect. I picked up the telephone and when the operator finally woke up, asked for the sheriff's office, and was told she was supposed to take messages for a while.

"Then get me the State Police, Sally. It's important."

It certainly was important. I wanted to reach Frank. I listened to Sally clearing the wires, and then a voice boomed in the receiver so loudly I thought it would wake up the girls. "Can you get a message to Sheriff Hawkins?" I asked quickly. "This is Henry Macdonald."

"Who?" said the cop.

I repeated my name. "The sheriff is out looking for a guy named Simmons. I'm at the Hawkins place now. I think Simmons is prowling around outside."

"Got a gun?" said the cop.

"Yeah," I said, like Humphrey Bogart.

"Lock it up," he said. "I'll get a car down there." He hung up in my ear. Sally had been listening and cut in to say she'd get a relief right away and dash over to the sheriff's office to put out a call on Frank's transmitter, which she knew how to use. I blessed her and gently hung up. Things were fine. The Marines were on the way.

DESPITE the cop's advice, I got my gun out of my coat and went out to the kitchen. I took a careful look on the back and side that were visible. Nothing stirred. I went down into the cellar because it had a slanting upward exit to the unfenced back yard, and I could creep out without too much showing. The thermostat switched on the oil burner and startled me and when I realized what it was I found that my hands weren't steady any more.

There wasn't any use kidding myself. I didn't want to go out in the yard and not because I might stumble over a croquet wicket. In my imagination, Simmons had already doped out my plans, and was sitting outside waiting for me to show my stupid head. I felt around until my fingers touched Frank's old field jacket that he used for working on household chores, squeezed into it, tiptoed over to the door, and stood there gulping, fighting down the rising intensity of my heartbeat.

I could hardly breathe and the pain of my terror was like a deep bayonet cut, slowly twisting. Then the pain leveled off and I knew it wouldn't slacken until that door was open, so I put my hand on the knob and gently turned it. Everything in Frank's house was in place and worked properly, but even so, the oiled lock sounded like a Wagnerian opera.

Standing with the door partly open, my heart pounded harder and was only relieved when I stalled by bending over to take off my shoes. Then, before my heart could throb into full chorus, I whipped the door open, slipped out onto the concrete steps, and closed the door behind me. The concrete was blessedly cold, and I huddled against it until I was able to tell myself that a gun hadn't been shoved down in my face.

As the blood stopped deafening me and restored my hearing to an abnormal keenness, I listened for stealthy footsteps. In my condition, I could have heard a gnat doing a softshoe routine. There was nothing. So I put up my head at the height of the ground and looked quickly around. There was a house more than two hundred feet to the right, gardens more than a hundred feet to the rear, and a house two hundred feet to the left.

By then my vision was acute, and helped by the faraway street lights, I could see nothing that shouldn't have been around. Maybe I was mistaken. Maybe I was gibbering onto the verge of hysteria for nothing. Maybe Frank was right and I had messed up a deal. And again, maybe there was someone in his two-car garage.

The garage was on the bedroom side of the house and if it was empty, it would be a good place to think things over. Lucy had

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the bedroom window open slightly and I could hear their oblivious snoring. That gave me the guts to leave the security of the concrete wellway and dash for the garage fifty feet away.

Frank had left the door up, so that his car leered out at the little driveway like a fire engine ready to zoom out at the clang of a bell. Flattened against the corner, I held the .38 high, took a deep breath and whipped into the garage to come face to face with anticlimax. It was empty.

Relieved, I sat down on the front bumper and looked out. I had a wide view of the bedroom side of the house all the way over to the neighbors next door. The light I had left on formed a dim puddle of milk on the grass. The shadow of the chair and pillow looked sufficiently realistic. I glanced at my watch. The whole operation had taken little more than ten minutes.

MY BLOOD vessels gratefully collapsed to the diameter of sewer pipes and the pains slowly left my chest and when I breathed it didn't hurt. My eyes patrolled from side to side ready for the first unusual movement. If Simmons was squatting down somewhere, even behind the garage, and had seen me enter, he had to get where I could see him before he did anything.

I prayed that he was somewhere across the street, though he could well have parked his car for a getaway in the alley. In any case, if I was right, he'd be attracted by the bedroom light. I hoped he hadn't seen me, that he would think I was asleep in the chair, and would creep up to the window to use his height in peering over the ledge before cutting loose. Against that light, I'd be sure to get him the instant he stopped.

On the other hand, if he had observed my exit and knew where I was, he either would have to give me a chance at him or go away. I wasn't in any hurry. I was content to wait for Frank to set up his roadblocks with the cops and then start combing for the two thugs. If Sally got her relief within a reasonable time, Frank could appear within a few minutes.

It was funny. I was calm, not so much because I was out of a box and able to defend myself as because I was able to be a watchdog for two young ladies who didn't even know they were in possible danger from an irresponsible gun-toter. When you stop worrying about your own skin a situation that had you in a sweat can become a situation you can handle. It wasn't bravery. Just anxiety over the possibility of losing a bride.

I was so positive that Simmons and his pal would come creeping over the lawn like Iroquois Indians, the car caught me by surprise. It came coasting gently down the road and passed without more than a faint slapping of tires. In fact, it got out of my field of vision before its outlines registered on my consciousness.

I stood up, adrenalin squirting into my bloodstream. Of course, they'd come in a car! Why creep when they could ride? I went to the side of the doorpost and peered out, ready for them to come trotting across the sidewalk. My feet were cold on the concrete but my hands were warm with sweat.

And then I saw a figure behind the house to my left. It was hidden in a pocket of darkness formed by the angle between the house and a small woodshed, and I wouldn't have seen it except for a flicker of light on a polished pit of metal. I forgot about the car. That figure could have been there when I came out because after the flicker of light the pocket looked exactly as it had every time I had glanced that way.

I concentrated on the woodshed, and when I next heard the car, presumed that it was Frank and Bill prowling. The flicker of light came again and leveled towards the car. I glanced at it quickly. It was backing gently into the driveway. Frank always backed in so that he could rush away on hurry calls. I drew a bead on the sliver of light and started to squeeze the trigger.

THINGS happened in a hurry.

The car stopped precisely opposite the rear bedroom, the passenger's side open, and the driver flicked on the spotlight and flooded the room where Lucy and Winnie were sleeping. I stared in amazement. A great big character sprinted towards the window. Without aiming, I swept the .38 in his direction and started jerking the trigger. Almost at the window, he turned towards the roses from my muzzle, cut down on me with a short-barreled automatic shotgun, and I dove to the deck.

"Put down that gun!" a huge voice

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boomed into the night. "You're surrounded!"

Simmons began to pump buckshot at me, just one shot and it wasn't a winner. Slugs clanged into Frank's car, tinkled the headlights and showered me with blinding dirt and gravel. Clawing at my eyes, I heard the brisk chatter of a Tommy gun, the frenzied mashing of gears, several screaming shots, and then running feet.

Stunned by the small-scale battle practise that had erupted around me, I got up, trying to rub sight into my stinging eyes.

"Here!" a gruff voice said. As hands led me to a blazing light, dinosaurs began to tramp around on my eyeballs, and a house-door slammed. Through fuzzy tears, I finally saw Rainey earnestly squinting at my face, a handkerchief in his hand. "That's got it," he said. "How do y' feel? Can't see any holes."

"I'm alive. You guys got here just in time." I didn't have to ask about Simmons. There was a blanket underneath the bedroom window, and the blanket bulged with big humps. The car, spotlight off, was almost at the road and a couple of cops were peering into it.

There was a burly uniformed character standing next to Rainey who seemed to be Sergeant Slattery. "Just in time, he says. Weren't you told to stay in the house?"

"Huh?" I said intelligently.

"You're pretty well cut up," Rainey said, taking my arm. "Slattery means we've been hanging around some time."

"Good," I mumbled. "Sally got through, eh?"

"Sally?" Rainey echoed. "Oh, you mean the telephone operator!" He stopped me and grinned. "You mean you doped this out and had her hop over to the office?"

"Yeah," I said, feeling pretty smug.

Rainey chuckled very briefly. "Listen," he said. "We didn't switch the frequency on the office transmitter. We didn't get any call from Sally. We didn't get any call from anybody. As soon as I told Frank about your blabbing in front of Simmons, we turned right around and came back. He called Slattery right in."

"Yeah," Slattery said, mimicked my tone. "Got here in time to catch your act, too. Notice how the boys ignored it?"

"Shut up," Rainey said. "They'd naturally work from the rear of the house to the front."

I didn't say anything. All those characters must have just about ripped themselves to pieces watching me play Dauntless Dick. Going into the house, I felt about as important as the empty beer cans Simmons was through squeezing. Then I saw Winnie and she looked the way I wanted her to look when she saw me, and I didn't mind when she rushed over to touch my chopped face and murmur the right things.

Frank came into the kitchen to announce that the doctor was on the way over to see if there was anything he could do. Lucy was busy rattling a coffee pot.

"How d'y feel?" Frank asked.

"O.K.," I said. So I wasn't smart. So Frank had been way ahead of me and been on the spot from the very first. So everybody had a good laugh. I didn't mind. Not with Winnie dabbing at my cuts with cotton and standing close to do a good job.

"You might have said something," Lucy remarked, when the coffee pot was on the stove. "Winnie and I nearly went crazy worrying."

Frank looked and said he was sorry.

"By the way," Lucy added, "I suppose the car is riddled because you stupidly left the door open while setting up that routine about the battery being dead?"

I liked the way Winnie felt in front of me. I didn't like to see Frank getting a lacing born of relief with Rainey and Slattery grinning on the other side of the kitchen. "Don't take that, Frank!" I butted in, as he looked sheepish. "Don't tell me they weren't sleeping! You should have heard them snoring away."

My cheek shrieked back from a stiff dose of iodine. "Henry Macdonald!" Winnie blazed. "Do you think I snore like that? When I told Lucy how worried you were, she said we'd better get out of bed and lie on the floor beside the windows. We took turns snoring!"

She threw down the wad of cotton and stormed out of the kitchen, housecoat jerking nicely to determined steps.

Rainey smiled at me. "Go on and wrassle," he advised.

I did and won the third fall.

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THAT CAJUN LAW OFFICER, HENRY POU, thought murder was bad enough—but trying to run him down with an automobile, well, that did rouse his ire.

"Neatly Framed for Hanging"

Part I of a Two-part Bayou Mystery Story

by

NEIL MARTIN

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Can a mine hate and harm as well as can evil men?

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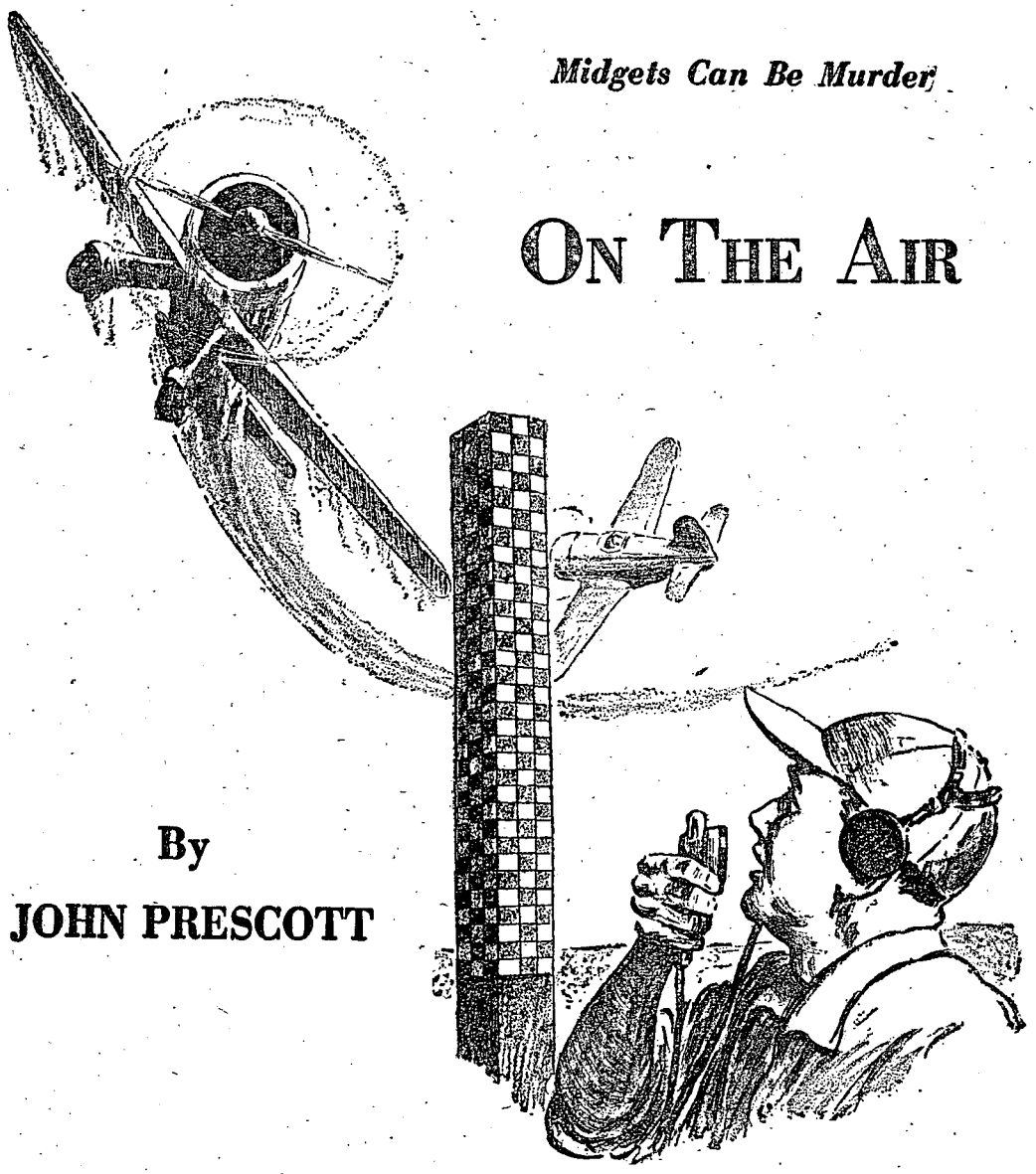
ON THE AIR



By

JOHN PRESCOTT

ALWAYS there is something in this business. If it isn't one thing it's another. There's no chance for it ever to get dull and unexciting and just ordinarily placid like other businesses sometimes do; and like it would be nice for this one to do now and then. No, it's never that way, and that's why I sometimes think it would be better if I got out of it and tried hooking rugs or making pottery or daubing my fingers with mud and charcoal to create primitive paintings, or driving a truck. But I never do.

So I put up with the trouble and the grief and inconvenience and carry on. But still it's always something. If it isn't Tony Allen, my boss, with a new idea which I have to discourage, then it is something wrong with the plane. And sometimes it's both; like the time he gleefully ignored the rules of the game and hooked up a blower to the Continental, thus boosting her modest eighty-five horsepower somewhat, and also drawing upon himself the wrath of the race committee, who quite rightfully held that Tony Allen or not he will follow the same rules with the midgets as the rest of the people.

But usually my trouble with him was not

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of that stripe, because he generally leaves the handling of the airplane, which he calls Hodge-Podge—and that is apt because it is pretty much that when it comes to parts—to me, and is off gadding about the country to one of his radio stations, of which he has a great many.

So then my trouble mostly evolved from one, Harry Jones, the pilot of the midget, who, though having a name which sounds inoffensive enough, was possessed of two vices. He fancied himself a singer, for one thing, and that was absurd because his was the kind of voice that would be right at home directing operations in a gravel pit; and he was growing fat—a thing which was far more insidious and was strangely coupled with the singing business because he believed himself in best form when he could crook his fingers about a mug of beer. And of course that was a deterring factor in the winning qualities of the Hodge-Podge.

You might think that ridiculous, but when you consider that the ship weighs no more than five hundred and fifty pounds empty and is only some sixteen feet long and four feet high you get an idea of what Harry's growing avoirdupois was doing to it. He weighed in at one-fifty when he came to work for us after the war, and at the time my grief commenced in earnest the needle on the drugstore scale was nudging the thick side of the two hundred mark.

And that is no good for racing a very small airplane at one hundred and eighty miles an hour around a three mile closed course at something less than sixty feet above the ground.

I had been feeling this for a while and though I carped at him about it I had tried to make up for it by polishing the valves a little more and souping the injection system somewhat, because Harry, delusions and all, was a fine, plodding sort of guy, and I didn't want to see him lose his job.

I got by with it until Miami and then it got out of my hands entirely. Tony showed up for that one and he saw then what I had known for a good while. There was very little soup left to put into the Continental, and he knew, as I did, that there was only one thing left to do.

As such the Miami races were fine, but then they always were because at that time of the year you have only to think how cold it is elsewhere and then Miami becomes glorious indeed, races or no. And it was still nice that time, even though things did not turn out quite like they should have; I guess it was that I had been expecting it and was not surprised.

IT WAS not bad to begin with because the Hodge-Podge had enough of the old stuff to get Harry off the ground in line with the others and into the lead. That was fine, but I had nearly expected it because I had changed fans to give him more take-off thrust. I am of the old school which holds that the take-off counts for a very great deal, and while there is much benefit to be had from a smaller fan which will give a higher engine RPM I knew that such would not do for getting Harry's ponderous bulk off the ground and into the front row. That guy needed all the blade area the Continental could swing.

But with that adjustment he got away on the running take-off well and took the first pylon in the fifteen lap race with a bare whisker between the shiny glass canopy and the checkered paint. The Continental snarled high and hungry and the red-painted bug-like little ship looked for all the world like she was going mad, and not to be headed. And she wasn't for awhile.

From nearly anywhere around the closed course you could see the planes, low as they were, because no one leg was over a mile long and they were formed in a triangle with huge, rising pylons at the turns. In the papers some guys called it dirt-track racing, and in truth, it's something like that because the paying customer can sit nice and tight in the stands and see every move that's made. It's not as fast as that Thompson Trophy stuff, but then how long can you keep your eyes on four hundred miles an hour?

FROM where Tony and I were in the infield with the tool kit, fuel tins and what-not we could see everything very well indeed. We could see how Harry slammed her flat outside the first pylon and came out and went blurring red and streaked low along the ground to the next turn. She didn't look like any sort of airplane at all doing that; rather like some sort of

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beetle, or maybe one of those lacquered June bugs.

We could hear her howling very clearly, too, although I knew right away that Tony could tell by the sound of her that I'd changed the fan. He didn't say anything just then; he just looked like he was trying to think ahead of that, and kept watching her and the others which were close-packed behind. They had begun to creep a bit during the stretch, and by the time the first lap ended they all went round the home pylon in a big bunch, like bees heading for the hive. Harry was still out front, but it didn't look like he could hold it.

Well, he didn't, but he kept it longer than I thought he would. Harry was kind of dopey and retiring and not very aggressive and if you looked at him you might get the idea that he could never learn to fly a plane; but he was not that way at all. As a matter of fact, he ran up a creditable score with a Mustang for himself, and so he was inclined to be deceptive. He was deceptive right then, and he kept his expanding girth in the lead a good deal longer than I thought he would.

But that all ended before long and after they had all shaken out some and made eight or nine laps I could see that Harry was going to start dropping soon. The take-off had given him an advantage, and I had hoped he might be able to exploit it some, but I knew then that what I had sacrificed to get him the lead was going to do him in now. A guy with his lard needed two airscrews—one to get him off the ground and another for level flight.

He dropped to second at the beginning of the tenth lap, and to fourth by the end of it. Tony Allen had it figured out by then, and he was more than a little angry.

"What made you do that?" he asked me uncivilly. "How come you gave him the long prop? I'll bet she isn't pulling over twenty-six hundred."

Well, twenty-six hundred wasn't bad as such, because that's what the mill was built to turn at, but I'd hopped it up some and so her normal RPM was higher.

"It seemed like a good idea," I said to him. "I wanted to make sure he got the lead."

He didn't say anything for a moment. They were going by again, on the twelfth, and so it was hard to hear. Harry had sagged to fifth.

"How much does he weigh now?" he asked me after they were gone.

I knew that one was coming sooner or later; it was bound to. In those shapeless coveralls Harry didn't look much different than he had when he was lighter, so there was no way of Tony knowing unless he got clever, which he just had, and doped it all out on the basis of that fan. There was no sense in being evasive about it anymore.

"About two hundred. I figured he'd need the big fan for the take-off, and I hoped he could hold the lead somehow."

"Well, now you know," Tony Allen said, and when he got mad that way his clean, smooth face got all dark and kind of blotched. "A fine thing to pull when I'm ramming around the country and have to leave things to you. Why didn't you let me know?" He stopped and glared. "How long has this been going on, anyway? He's lost four in the last two months; four out of six. What a hell of a record that is. Does he sleep with a ham hock?"

I shrugged and shook my head. Harry was a great one for the trencher, but it wasn't that. It was the beer and the quartet singing in some back-street joint in the small hours, which of course meant more beer. But I had a feeling it wasn't the right time to mention that.

"Maybe it's glands," I said, and if I hadn't known better I maybe could have sold myself on that one. "Guys have glands that do that sometimes. They just get bigger and bigger."

Tony Allen brushed that away with a derisive snort. "We've got to do something," he said. "We can't go on this way. That's not what I bought the plane for."

HE WAVED his arm in the general direction of the planes which were going into the last lap. They were blazing around the home pylon again, moving like streaks of light—red, green, blue, black and yellow. They were going a million miles an hour, it seemed, screaming flat along the ground past the stands and spreading suddenly flat against the sky as they jerked their stubbed wings into the turn. They were no more than a hundred feet above the ground and I could feel the vibration wriggling and

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squirming in the earth. They went by and it was quiet at last. Harry was back in sixth, and there were only seven planes.

I waited until they were gone and then said, "What?"

"We got to get someone else," Tony Allen said, and he looked in surprise at me, as though he was wondering if I was too thick to figure it out myself. "In another month that plane won't get him off the ground; hell, that engine's only got a hundred and eighty-eight cubic inches. He needs a transport now."

I said quickly, "Look, Tony, give the guy a break. Look at his record. Think how hot he was last year, and the year before. Remember all those wins he got? How he took the Hodge-Podge and kicked her right to the top of the heap?"

Tony didn't say anything for a minute and I got the idea that he wasn't thinking of what I'd just said. There was something different about him, somehow, as though the irritation Harry caused was only incidental. He watched the planes clear off to land and I began to hope for Harry's sake because Tony didn't know him as I did; he didn't know how there was nothing else in the world that Harry knew how to do; or that he blew his dough just as quickly as he got it.

After a while he said slowly, still preoccupied, "All right, Louie; you're making me cry. But this has been going on a long time and I know it. We can't just carry the guy. One more ride he gets, and then we see. Atlanta in two weeks; he wins, or else—"

"Okay," I said as quietly as I could in all that racket. "That's fair enough," and I guess it was because Tony had been right We'd been carrying Harry for a long time. "You want to tell him now?"

Tony Allen said slowly, "No, you tell him. I might get sore and push him in the belly. Besides," and he snapped out of whatever he was in, "I got to go. I got an appointment in New York in five hours."

He gave me a quick flip with his hand and then he moved off across the grass and I turned around and watched the ships come in to land. Harry was the last one in and he came down a long, flat angle and flew it right into the ground. He bounced it over to where the gear was, ran the engine out of fuel and let her die. When he got out of the pit he looked big enough to stick the plane under his arm and carry it away. He also looked somewhat sheepish.

There was no sense in holding off and so I gave it to him right there; just the way Tony had told me. I didn't know what to expect and for a moment he said nothing. He didn't even seem to be thinking of what I'd told him. His brows were fretted together and he was looking way off at one of the pylons. Then he began to hum in a weird way and he looked at me. His face had an expression of childish delight.

"What's that one?" he asked me. "What's that one about the miner and his daughter? It's been runnin' through my mind all day."

"That's Clementine," I said, and I began to edge away.

But I was not fast enough. Even the blast of an overhead midget was not enough to drown out that awful caterwauling about the miner's daughter whose footgear was herring boxes, and who finally drowned in a fine display of beautiful bubbles.

WELL, the happy dewy ending was to have a first-class win at Atlanta wherein all the old doubts and hoodoos would be dispelled and Harry would once more be numbered among the elite, but I had a feeling before we went that it would not be. And it wasn't. Though I spent a full ten days preening the Continental and the ship, and all my nights supervising Harry's diet, our reward was not forthcoming. He got away fine again, because I'd used the big fan, but after that it was the old Miami story, only faster and more complete. And that time I was not sure whether I gave a damn or not.

I didn't expect any wondrous transformation, nor did I envisage divine intervention to overcome his prodigious bulk, but I think I had a right to expect some change in attitude. But he was the sort of guy who didn't seem to realize the danger he was in; it didn't appear to make any difference whether he made the grade or not, and if it wasn't for the responsibility which I in some obscure fashion felt for him I would have washed my hands of him long ago. But how can you send a child out into the snow.

Every once in a while before that race I'd surprise him with a little look of fear and

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wonderment on his face, as though it was sinking in at last, but mostly it seemed that he wasn't more than vaguely aware of what was happening to him.

I don't know just when it was during the heat that I saw Tony coming to where I'd set up shop in the infield. It was along toward the middle, though, because the planes had been buzzing around the course for some time. I'd known he was going to show up because I'd gotten his wire, a terse thing, but he hadn't mentioned company, and here he was, coming across the field with a girl. And a very handsome one at that.

We exchanged amenities and I observed in a covert way that she had a very fine face, nice and compact and everything arranged in such a way as to make it even beautiful; and then for awhile I didn't pay much attention to them because things had reached a critical stage and I was beginning to pray a little bit for Harry.

But presently I became aware, as she and the boss exchanged a chatter back and forth, that this girl, whose name was Genevieve Smith, was not the usual sort of spectator at all; and I think I could even feel the hair at the back of my neck crawling a little as I caught fragments of the talk between the passing planes.

"Oh my," she said one time. "They are small, aren't they? Nothing like a Thirty-Eight at all, or a Fifty-One. What's their top speed? No retractable gear either."

Then a plane went by and for awhile I didn't hear anything. When the noise died somewhat Tony was saying something I couldn't catch but Genevieve Smith nodded knowingly and said, "What it needs is more RPM. It's swinging too much blade."

I caught that very clearly and when I scowled at her Tony was looking around behind her and grinning at me. It was one of those wordless gestures which say a great deal and then I knew who this Miss Smith was and what she was doing there. Tony had pulled the fastest one I'd ever seen him pull; indeed he had taken things into his own hands and had got himself a pilot who weighed just about one half of what old Harry did.

That was all intuition, or whatever it is that tells you there is disaster at hand, but I knew as surely as if he'd told me himself, and I thought what a cross-up for Harry—and what a come-down; replaced by a pint-sized dame.

I could not think what Harry's reaction might be except perhaps to realize at long last where his follies had led him; but I might have known it would not be worth trying to guess, because it was beyond anything I had imagined. When he landed he waddled the ship over and got out and hung his head. Then he saw Miss Smith and took an interest; he began to smile in a way that was absolutely sickening and I wanted to yell at him and say, "You jerk! She's stealing your job!"

But it was too fascinating and I could only stare stupidly as he got friendly in a bear-like way and as Genevieve Smith's mouth formed an expression of distaste when he lumbered toward her; and as she seemed to recoil somehow when she heard that awful voice of his. He did not seem to be aware of anythng but her, not even Tony Allen who had to shout at him several times that he was fired. But even that didn't seem to bother Harry Jones. Tony wasn't in it then at all.

WELL, strictly speaking, Harry Jones was not fired as conclusively as it had sounded. Miss Genevieve Smith, while possessing a formidable background, including war-time WASP service, and a number of cross-country races in converted pursuit ships, was not acquainted with the midgets and so Harry was to be retained until she became "oriented," as Tony Allen put it.

For myself I would have said, "Nuts, and to hell with it," and would have packed off in a dudgeon, but Harry, the shambling fool, did nothing like that at all. As a matter of fact it did not seem to bother him a bit and in a day or two I was aware that he was undergoing a curious transformation. For one thing, he got his hair cut, which was a vast improvement, and for another he developed the habit of reporting on the job with a crease in his pants. But while these were desirable in themselves they were obviously motivated by what we know as dame reaction.

He even built and installed a small and compact two-way radio just aft the headrest in the Hodge-Podge. "Instruct her better this way," he said. "Practically no weight to it at all."

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But this expression of efficiency and devotion was totally lost on Miss Smith, and it struck me when she spoke of it that she could be very brittle when the occasion demanded; and the occasion seemed always present when there was anything concerning Harry Jones.

"That big boob has gone and put a radio in here," she said to me one morning. "It's bad enough listening to him on the ground, but to have that voice assaulting me in the air, too, is going to be unbearable. Does he think I can't fly?"

"Well, he wants to make sure you do it right," I said with equal hauteur. I had developed a keen dislike for this young thing who was easing my friend out of room and board, and though he had lost his mind and didn't seem to care, I wanted her to understand that all was not posies and trilliums with me. "He has spent a lot of hours in that ship and he doesn't want it smashed all at once."

We understood each other quite well after that one, and I will say that her blue eyes were just as pretty frozen over as otherwise. It was very pleasant to have scored and I only wished that Harry would come to his senses and adopt the same attitude; but he became more hopeless every day. Sometimes he got absolutely maudlin with that girl.

BUT there was a ray of hope and it appeared in a strange and untoward fashion; it was the sort of thing I had not looked for with him and so it was not evident to me until we took the Hodge-Podge and Miss Smith to her first race at Dallas. Because he was not flying that day, Harry did not wear his all-concealing coveralls, and so it was clear for all to see. That man was losing weight.

The reason for it was obvious because for weeks he had been bending over backwards and sideways to get himself a tumble from that job-thief, and though it was a total failure from that standpoint I began to get an idea on how I could apply his absence from the beer halls to his benefit; for in truth he was abstaining totally.

This thought was so compelling that I found it somewhat difficult to concentrate on the race, which was some different than our other ones because now the Hodge-Podge carried only a hundred pounds in the pit; and showed it. As it was, Miss Smith made a respectable third out of it; a fine showing, I will say grudgingly, though I am prone to believe that Harry's muttering into the radio was some help.

But this idea clung to my mind far more tenaciously than did the memory of Genevieve Smith descending flushed and very trim in her jumper from the plane, and that of Harry Jones becoming all red and stammering when he tried to help her, and not even minding when she fired him a glance of disdain. And so I took it, while it was still young and fresh with life, to the hotel where Tony Allen was staying.

He had come down for the races, but for some reason of which he did not advise me, had not appeared at the field. I found him lying on his bed with an ice-bag on his head; and he did not look happy.

I said without any preliminaries, "Well, she got a third. Buzz Koffend won it, and Tommy Grant took second. How come you didn't show up?"

He waved his hand listlessly and looked pained.

"I got a headache. I couldn't stand to hear those damned things banging at me all afternoon." He took the ice bag off and looked at me. "She got a third? Not bad for a start."

"Yeah, but she got a hand from Harry. He gave her tips on the radio." I took a breath; it was as good a time as any and there was no place he could run to. "Harry's losing weight," I said. "It's silly, but he thinks he's a lady-killer and he's trying to knock the pounds off. He's been behaving very well lately. Not a beer in four weeks. I think he should be down to his normal weight by the time Cleveland rolls around. How about giving him another shot at the Hodge-Podge?"

This time Tony sat up on the bed and let his feet dangle.

"Don't be ridiculous," he said. "He had his chance, and goofed it up. This Smith is all right; not much chance of her putting it on like him. In a few weeks she ought to be up there with the best of them and then we don't have to think about it anymore."

He flapped his hand at me and lay down down again. He replaced the ice bag and sighed.

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"Besides, I can't worry about that. I got enough on my mind. I got network troubles; unless I dig up some first-class talent I'm going to lose my most opulent sponsor. Continental's offered him Melba Lane."

Then I got the why of the ice bag and the ash tray heaped high with short butts and the telephone next to the pillow, and I guess I felt a litte sorry for him, but not so much that it didn't please me some to see him squirm the way Harry was squirming; or the way Harry should have been squirming, which he wasn't. When I got back to the small hangar we'd rented for the day he was polishing his windscreen lovingly and giving bawling vent to Sweet Genevieve. Miss Smith was nowhere around.

WELL, pretty soon late winter became early spring and then late spring and we began to work further north. The trees were budding with little knots all over the ends of the branches, the sun became warm, a few green shoots speared up out of the wet ground, and Harry Jones kept getting thinner. He was getting positively sleek, but all this was lost on Genevieve Smith, and worse, on Tony Allen. He was a hell of a stubborn guy.

And he was morose, too, and I was thinking all the time that it was a good thing we didn't see him more frequently than we did. Sometimes he'd show up, like at Nashville, and that time at Cincinnati, and grouse around, always preoccupied, and with no cheer like in the old days. The only pleasure he took was in Genevieve's winning, which she was doing considerably of by that time, and then he would smirk at me and say, "Well, at least we're making money on this end for a change."

But I did give up my thoughts on Harry Jones. There did not seem to be much chance, but I kept pounding away at Tony about it and then finally one day he amazed me and threw up his hands and said, "All right, damn it, I'll give him a chance; if Jenny louses things at Cleveland I'll let him try it again, but if she wins we don't need him any more at all. So we'll settle him one way or the other. Maybe I was rash in signing her on, but she's been all right so far; although I know Cleveland will be tougher. We'll make our decisions after that one."

He looked at me and smiled crookedly. "What the hell, maybe it won't make any difference by then anyway. Maybe we won't even have a plane."

I didn't follow him too well on that, but I'd got what I wanted and so I shoved off and left him with his troubles, which really seemed considerable. I went back to the races again and I kept quiet. I didn't say anything to either of them; somehow or other I got the idea it wouldn't make much difference to Harry—the guy was lost—and it occurred to me that I couldn't very well take it to Miss Smith and gloat over it.

I'd thought there might be some pleasure in that, but now that I had the opportunity to put the pressure on it didn't seem right; and while sometimes when that ice was floating around in her eyes I'd get sore enough to let her have it straight, there were other times when her guard was down and she looked like the girl next door. She had nice yellow hair and when she was that way it made you want to pet it or something like that.

But she was never that way when she was really aware that we were around, especially Harry, and I used to wonder why in hell he didn't give up and call it a day. She would get just as sore with him as a girl can get, and when she did that I'd stop thinking of her as the girl next door and get back to regarding her as something that was in the way and which I would be glad to get rid of if I could. And Cleveland was coming closer.

All this time we kept getting more short and snappy with one another, except for Harry, who put up with whatever Genevieve Smith had for him and asked for more, and I was beginning to wonder why I had ever taken this interest in him in the first place and why I had gone to all the trouble of trying to keep him on.

AND then suddenly one day all that was behind us and we were at Cleveland, with the big crowds, the airplanes, the Army and Navy, the bands and all the tension that goes with that sort of thing. The service boys put on some fine acrobatics and formation stuff and strafing runs; the Thompson Trophy ships ran off a few hot heats which you could hear; but could barely see because they were only blurs in the air,

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and then presently it was us, and Genevieve Smith, as calm and cool as an icicle, was getting into the Hodge-Podge and Harry was bending over the set which he had set up on the ground in the infield.

Tony Allen showed up just before take-off and he talked quietly to Miss Smith for awhile, fiddled beneath the cowl of the ship, sneered at Harry and scowled at me. He was in a fine mood, all right, no different from any time in the past month or so.

Then there was a lot of noise from the speaker system and everyone cleared away from the line of ships and I went around and pulled the fan through. I had spent a whole week on final ad-libbing with the Continental; I had put on the short prop and had even trimmed that down another half inch so Miss Smith could have the engine turn faster than it ever had before. It came through sweet on the third pull and then I jumped away; when the flag came down she was in the front row and the first one off the ground.

I had seen that Genevieve Smith fly some six or seven races for us but I will say I never saw her fly anything like the way she did that day. You'd think a mere girl would peter out in the face of all that competition —there was a pile of money up there and there were a number of rough pilots flying —but the way she handled the Hodge-Podge you got the idea she was not so very mere at all. And that was too bad in a way because I'd got myself all set to relish any bad luck she might have, and here I was, admiring her a little.

And that kind of grew on me after a bit because she took her turns as good as Harry ever had; she slammed the ship flat up and vertical to the ground, and tore around the checkered poles with no more than a sliver of light between her and the marker. She took her straightaways flat out and low, ramming the Continental for all it had and then cutting up in a tight wrench for the next turn. She did it all very well indeed, and I could see my bid for Harry fading. I could get no response from him because he was bending over his microphone, but I caught Tony Allen's first smile of the day and I knew that I was right.

She had led all the way from the take-off run and she had stretched the lead slowly and steadily until by the tenth lap it began to look almost cut and dried. In the middle of that one I bent over Harry's shoulder to try and hear what he was saying, and when I looked up the Hodge-Podge was on fire.

You could not tell immediately and at first you might think the red paint was running or doing something queer, but then in a second you could see the red-black bubble of flame expanding from the engine cowl and flicking in a crimson tongue along the fuselage. And you could see the smoke, the thin, black and gray streamer, whipping like a kite tail as the ship roared along the ground and trailed it around the pylons.

Tony Allen had turned white and I yelled at Harry Jones, "Get her down! Get her the hell out of that thing!" And Harry bobbed his head numbly and began to speak with pathos into the microphone, all the while following the burning midget with eyes which were suddenly stricken and hollow.

THAT was in the tenth lap and all around us I could hear the rising screech of sirens and see people running

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and the crash trucks and meat wagons milling around and darting along the grass, but not going in any particular direction because Genevieve Smith had elected not to land at all, but appeared to be finishing her race.

By the time the twelfth lap came up the trucks and wagons had stopped all that futile plunging around and were scattered about the course waiting for something to happen, but still she kept up there, or down there rather, because she was flying even lower now as though she was trying to win a race with something other than mere airplanes.

Tony Allen's face was totally ashen by then and I found myself talking sort of incoherently to no one in particular, just babbling out loud, "Come on, baby, bring it in. All is forgiven, you're a sweetheart if there ever was one. You're a honey. Oh, sweet Genevieve."

But still Genevieve did not quit, and it looked like murder sure; she kept screaming around the course in that flaming double boiler until she came out of the last lap and passed the final pylon in a wide streak of sticky smoke. Then she shot up high in a slow turn and rolled around to come in to land; and all the sirens started screaming again and the trucks went galloping across the field to where she was going to smear herself all over the ground.

Only she didn't. She came down in a steep angle, slipping some to keep the fire away from the glass, and then she went out of view just as she touched down. I heaved a big lungful of wind and looked at Harry; and damn him, he was singing into the mike.

Well, she landed all right and kept rolling like a burning bundle of sagebrush until she got nearly to us and then she flipped up the canopy and piled out and started to run. She ran faster than I ever saw a girl run before and she didn't stop until she crumpled right up in Harry's arms.

He looked positively stupid standing there and not knowing what to do, and even more so when she hauled off and gave him a kiss that must have curled the soles of his shoes. He began to sag a little and she went to Tony and kissed him, but only friendly like, and then me, but with much reserve. When she went back to Harry she sort of leaned on him and cooed. And he looked as though he'd just stepped into heaven.

"Oh, Harry, I was scared; scared to death," she said. "I'd never have made it if it hadn't been for you. But you talked me in, and you sang me in, too—you gave me enough courage or whatever it was to finish and to land, too. It was just sort of down to earth and calm, sort of homespun. I always thought you had a terrible voice before, but today it was the most wonderful thing in the world."

She leaned away from him a bit and gave him the most beautiful smile I'd ever seen. "You're just like those guys with the radio voices with the pull, Harry. You're a dream." And then she kissed him again.

WELL, like I said before there is always something with this business, and you never know what it is going to be next. When Tony Allen heard her say that he reared up and looked at Harry as though he had never seen him before, and then he tore off across the field toward the nearest phone faster than the Hodge-Podge. When he came back he had a grin a mile wide and he began to behave toward Harry as though he was a rich relative.

And I guess he was in a sense because shortly after that Harry went on the air for that sponsor Tony had been having trouble with, and today they call him Homespun Harry. He has a national hook-up, and since he doesn't even have to think about his weight any more he and Mrs. Genevieve Jones have gone to live in Milwaukee where he has breweries on all sides and in any direction.

As for myself I still have charge of the Hodge-Podge, though at present we have no pilot. But if I could be sure that things would turn out as well for me as they did for Harry I might try to fly the damned thing myself.

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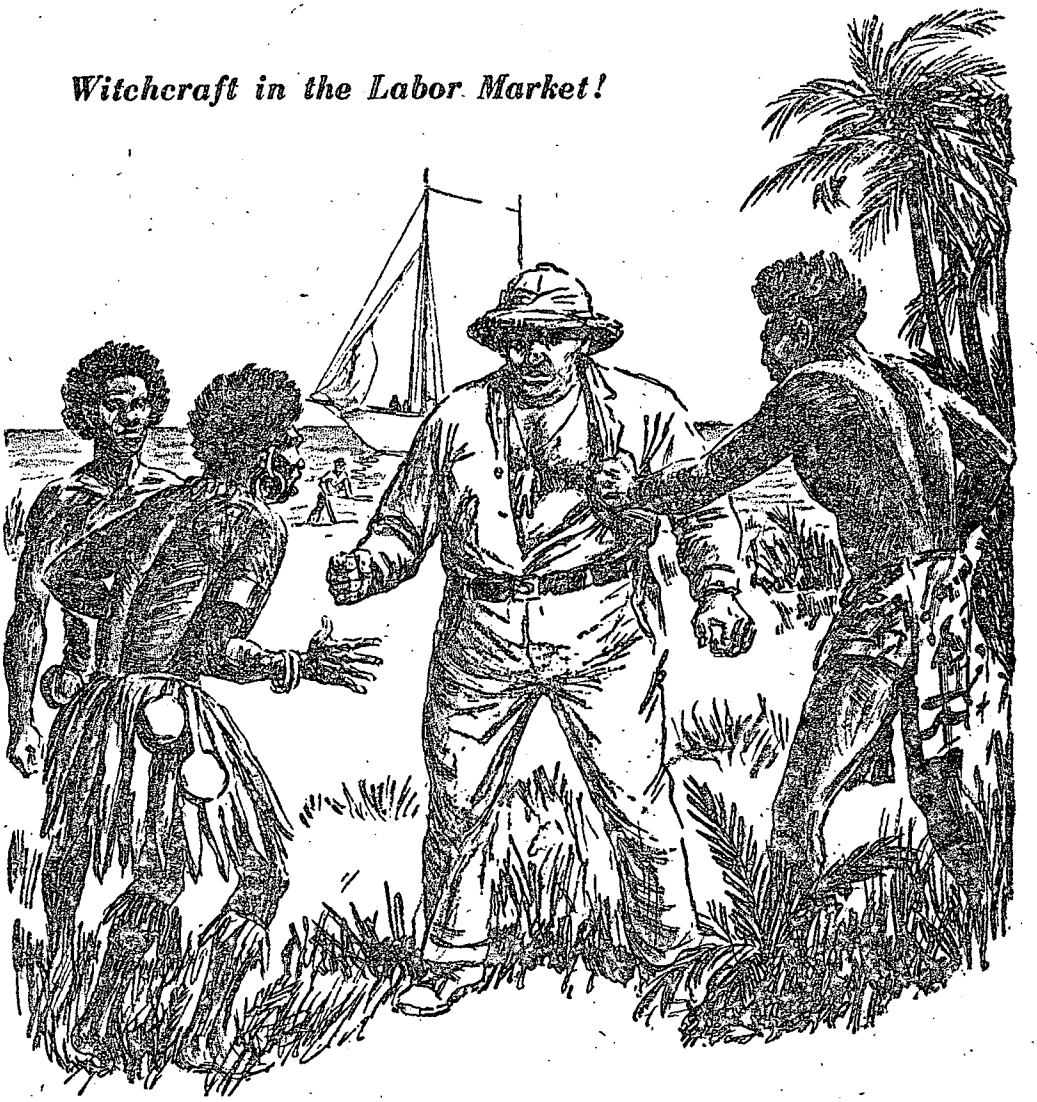
Witchcraft in the Labor Market!



NUMBER ONE MAGIC

By HUGH B. CAVE

IT WAS Karani's own industry that got him into trouble. Other young men of Sugu were drowsing in the heat that afternoon, content to be doing nothing. Karani had tucked his fish-spear under one arm and tramped the jungle path to the beach.

On his return to the village he was unaware, therefore, of the white man's presence. Boldly, with his string of fish over one sturdy shoulder, he marched up the village street.

The white man saw him, and Karani was doomed.

The white man's name was Mulverson. He was a recruiter. From San Cristobal to Buka, everyone knew Mulverson. Every copra planter, missionary, government district officer, and very nearly every native headman.

This was partly due to his size. He could stagger to his feet after a go of malaria and *still* weigh three hundred pounds. But mostly it was because of his reputation. No

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one got the best of Mulverson. His job was to find native boys to work on the plantations, and month in and month out he obtained more recruits than any other man of his calling in the Solomons.

If Mulverson had a weakness, it was his passion for native knick-knacks. His house in San Cristobal bulged with them. But that was no weakness. He paid for none of them!

MULVERSON did not call often at Sugu. Sugu was a small village, far back in the bush from as desolate a stretch of shore as could be found anywhere in the Islands. But when Karani marched through the village that fateful afternoon, Mulverson was sitting on a camp stool in front of the headman's hut, dangling a handsome dollar watch before the old chief's greedy eyes.

The headman already had summoned four of Sugu's young men and advised them to accept Mulverson's terms. But Mulverson was not satisfied.

When he saw Karani, a smile creased his enormous face. "Who's that one?" he demanded, leaning forward to stare.

The headman hesitated. "Him name Karani." But, he pointed out, Karani had no wish to leave Sugu and work on a copra plantation. Karani had responsibilities. His father was ailing. He had a young sister to take care of.

"Trot him over here," commanded Mulverson, annoyed.

Karani was summoned and came, and his sister came with him, the two of them holding hands like children. He was the tallest and sturdiest young man in Sugu, a remarkable specimen of Malaitan savage, lifting his head high and defiantly returning the fat recruiter's gaze. His sister, Noni, was a slim little thing and afraid.

"I'll take him along too," said Mulverson.

"But," protested the headman, "he is needed here!"

"Fiddlesticks! He'll be back in three years, won't he?" And out of his pocket Mulverson took a handsome gold-plated ring with a green glass eye.

The headman looked at the ring and his hands itched so that he had to scrub them on his bony knees. He dismissed Karani and the other boys and limped across the village to the palm-thatched house of the village sorcerer.

Now legally, of course, Mulverson had not a leg to stand on. No native could be signed to work on the copra plantations against his wishes. The law on that point was clear. But there are ways . . . oh, yes, there are ways! No one ever got the best of Mulverson!

Moreover, actually Karani had long been a worry to the wrinkled old headman of Sugu. He was a malcontent. Instead of sitting peacefully in the sun, brushing away flies and watching the antics of the village dogs, he wandered on far strange journeys.

He had been to other, bigger villages. He had traveled down the coast to settlements where white men lived. His head was full of useless scraps of knowledge, and he had been heard to insist that Sugu, his own village, was dirty, backward, and badly managed. Such impudence!

THE headman discussed the situation with the sorcerer, by name Jawago, who looked about him at the implements of his trade and smiled. From a niche under the thatch Jawago took down his Number One Charm. Majestically he waddled across the village to call on Karani.

"When the recruiter departs in the morning," he told Karani, "you are to go with him. I have decided."

Karani gazed into the sorcerer's glowering eyes and was silent. He looked into the even uglier countenance of the bone image clutched in Jawago's ancient fist, and bowed his head. Who was he, a youth of twenty, to defy the all-powerful sorcerer of Sugu? When Jawago had departed, Karani found his sister and told her the unhappy news. She wept.

Well she might weep! If Karani went away, old Jawago would marry her off to some worthless young man of the village, or sell her to a neighboring village. Then her time and her labors would belong to her husband, and her father, who was ailing, would waste away and die. He was shrewd, was Jawago. He knew how to get rid of those who had no love for him!

But if Karani refused to go, there was no telling *what* would happen. Sickness, ill fortune, death . . . nothing was beyond the sorcerer's dread power!

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Noni wept bitterly, but Karani was grim. "Dry your eyes," he told her. "I stay!"

"But he will destroy you! He is all-powerful! It is forbidden even to enter his house unbidden or touch anything that belongs to him!"

Karani bit his lip and looked away. He did not have to be told the dangers of defying the witch-doctor. He had been born and brought up to such things. But he refused to yield until Noni, in her terror, went and got the other young men and they pleaded with him to be reasonable.

His defiance, they insisted, might cause frightful things to happen to them all. And after all, life on a copra plantation was not so bad. Not all white men were as uncouth as Mulverson.

In the end Karani went with them to sign the papers. When his turn came to dip his thumb in the puddle of ink and make his mark, he did not protest.

Night fell and the village slept—all but Mulverson, the witch-doctor and the headman, who sat talking in front of the latter's house. Karani crept from his mat. Without a sound he stole across the village to the dark hut of the sorcerer.

Afraid? Of course he was! For all he knew, his stealthy footsteps were loud as drumbeats in Jawago's magic mind, and he would be turned to dust at any instant, without warning! But he crossed the forbidden threshold. He advanced through the threatening gloom, past the sorcerer's dusty collection of gourds and pandanus streamers and bone rattles. He sank his teeth in his trembling lower lip and put forth his hand.

When he emerged from the sorcerer's house he was pale and quaking, but his resolve was still unshaken. He went home and told Noni what he had done.

His sister's eyes grew round with terror.

Karani calmed her. "Listen to me now," he said. "Listen carefully. Here is what you must do. . . ." And Noni listened, because she knew he was incredibly brave.

IN THE morning the young recruits said farewell to families and friends and set forth with Mulverson for the cove where his schooner lay. A sad parting! Three years must elapse before they could be expected back. Some, perhaps, would not return at all.

Noni, her dusky eyes brimming, clung to Karani's hand to the last, and their father crept to the doorway of his hut to wave a feeble farewell. But Noni's sobs were drowned by the laughter and high good humor of old Jawago and the headman, who waddled at the end of the line. Mulverson, ever shrewd, had promised these two tobacco and gifts in return for the weight of their presence on the march to the shore. He feared an incident.

There was no incident. Mulverson had won again. No one got the best of Mulverson!

But on the beach, in sight of the white man's schooner, Karani halted. He planted his strong bare feet in the black sand and folded his muscular arms. "I go no farther," he announced.

Thunder and lightning! Who ever heard of such insolence from a mere bush boy? The other recruits stood mute with trepidation. Old Jawago, apoplectic, leveled a

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trembling finger and screamed all kinds of awful threats.

"Save your breath, old man. Your threats are all wind," said Karani calmly. "Your power is gone, if ever you had any. Look!" He turned swiftly to the unsuspecting Mulverson, and his fingers stripped the buttons from the recruiters's faded shirt. There on a cord about Mulverson's fat neck dangled Jawago's Number One charm!

In his rage the sorcerer erred. A natural mistake, but fatal. He rushed at Mulverson to get his property back. Mulverson, with a grunt, brushed him aside and sent him ignominiously sprawling.

"You see?" said Karani to the young men of the village. "Your witch-doctor is just a harmless old man—to be pitied, perhaps, but not feared."

They saw more than that. They saw fright in the eyes of their chief. He, too, was just a harmless old man, nothing at all without Jawago to lean on. The true headman of Sugu was Karani. Of course! Of course!

But they reckoned without Mulverson. *No one* got the best of Mulverson.

The recruiter had drawn his revolver. It was aimed at Karani's gleaming chest. "All very nice," said Mulverson, "but you've signed the papers, confound it, and you go with me whether you like it or not! The lot of you! With no more nonsense!"

Old Jawago picked himself up from the sand and took courage. The headman came alive again, too. But Karani, his arms folded, head high, budged not an inch.

"Get aboard the schooner!" roared Mulverson. "You signed, and you'll stick to the bargain!"

"What did we sign?" said Karani.

Mulverson, suspicious, thrust a hand to his pocket where lay the papers. If the papers were gone, stolen, he would know how to deal with the situation. He had the law on his side. He had a gun. But the papers were not gone.

He whipped them open. "I'll read what you—"

His tongue thickened. His eyes were like cowry shells.

"You see," said Karani calmly, "there are no thumb prints on your papers. No marks at all."

And, by heaven, there weren't!

That finished Mulverson. He knew better than to try to force unsigned recruits to go with him. The law would never stand for such high-handedness. Helpless, profoundly puzzled, altogether unhappy, he flung the worthless papers down and lurched away, glad to be out of there where things were past all understanding.

Karani faced the young men of Sugu. "Could Jawago have done that?" he challenged.

"No, no!" They were most emphatic.

"Yet I am no sorcerer," said Karani. He beckoned, and from the green shadows of the jungle came Noni, his sister, to stand by his side. "Last night," Karani went on, "I took the Number One Charm of that foolish old man and hung it about Noni's neck. She walked past the house assigned to the white man, who sat alone in his doorway, scheming his schemes. He saw the charm. He had a fondness for such things, as everyone knows. He followed her and offered her gifts for it, and she kept him talking while I slipped into his house. And do you know what I did there?"

They had no idea. But it was magic, surely!

"Not magic," said Karani firmly. "I took these"—he stooped to pick up the papers left behind by Mulverson—"and rubbed the ink marks with a milky sap which the men of the coast villages use sometimes to whiten the wood of their canoes. I know no sorcery, only the secrets of the jungle. Now go home and wait for me!"

They went, leaving Karani and Noni on the beach. And when Mulverson looked back from the deck of his schooner, as she cleared the cove where he'd got himself scuttled, he saw them there. He saw them standing bold in the sunlight, defiantly gazing after him.

Mulverson didn't know the whole story —then. But he understood one thing clearly. The old order was changing. Things would never be the same again in Sugu.

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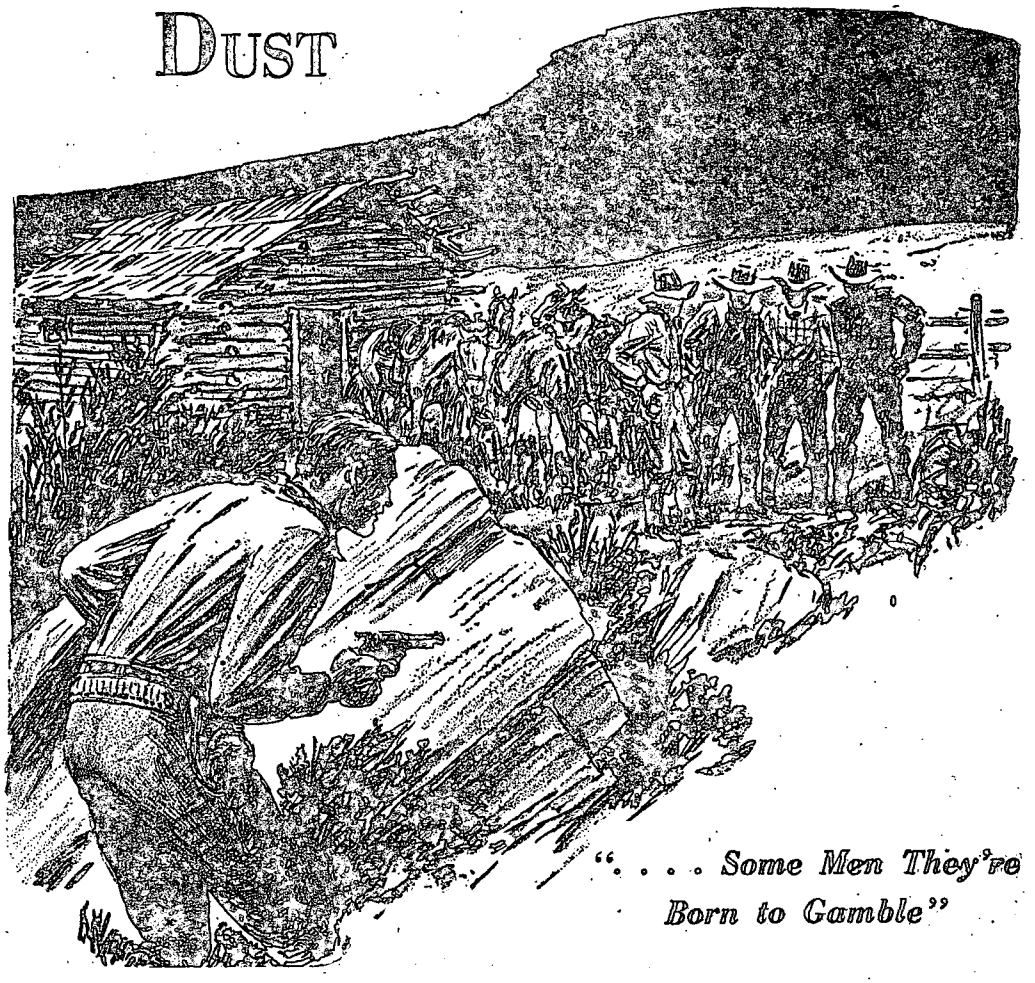
DESERT DUST

By HAPSBURG LIEBE



". . . . Some Men They're Born to Gamble"

AGAIN Jim Fernander collapsed in the hot desert sand. This time he lay as he had fallen, lay there while the blazing sun went down and a great blood-orange moon rose on the other side of the world. It was cooler now. He got to his feet and fought on once more, and a quarter of an hour later he came to a winding road that cut off a corner of the bone-dry wasteland.

The road was not much used, but the sight of it stiffened him. He followed it eastward. After a few minutes, a buckboard overtook him. The vehicle was driven by a little and wizened old gray man. Fernander lurched out of the sandy ruts, mouthing:

"Any water?"

The gray man reined down quickly, and dug out a canteen. Fernander drank deeply.

"Not too much at the start, friend," cautioned the oldster, snatching the canteen away. "Now get into the seat with me, and I'll take you along home. My name is Lycurgus Aberdeen, and I live out in the cattle country on the Cross Bar ranch. Who're you?"

Jim Fernander gave his name, mumbled his thanks for the other's kindness, and managed to climb into the buckboard seat. Aberdeen drove on. A moment later he inquired, "What was you doin' afoot in this sandy hell, friend, anyhow?"

"About once a year I take a ramblin' spell of a week or so," explained the younger

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man, "and this time I tried ridin' across the desert. Stopped at what looked like a water-hole but wasn't, and my horse got away. Fool like, I'd forgot to drop rein."

Aberdeen had noted that Fernander's clothing, from Spanish boots to pearl-gray Stetson hat, was extremely good. Also he had seen that the other's holstered six-shooter had ivory handles and was mounted in silver.

They made miles in silence. Jim Fernander's dog-weariness, thanks chiefly to water from the old-timer's canteen, had started melting away fast. He chanced to look over the back of the seat. The moonlight showed him a longish object swathed in a blanket on the buckboard floor behind. A rope passed twice across its center held it against the continual jouncing of the vehicle.

"What's that you got back there, Aberdeen, if you don't mind my askin'?"

"Don't matter what it is." There was a measure of iron in the creaky voice. "Yore clothes tells me you're skassly riff-raff, and so I'm willin' to try takin' yore word for it that you won't neither ask questions nor tell anything you may jest happen to see whilst you are a-recuperatin' at my house. Promise?"

Jim Fernander nodded. "Absolutely, old-timer. I've never bit the hand that fed me, and I won't, ever."

"That's the way I like to hear a man talk," said Lycurgus Aberdeen. "I have a job to offer you, young pardner. Not hard work. Nothin' to do but jest ride around on that deserted ranch, never out o' sight o' the house, to see that no harm comes to me or mine, keepin' all strangers away—don't matter why. Y'want the job?"

"Ranch is deserted, you say?"

"No cattle, I mean. Y'want the job I mentioned jest now?"

"Why, I guess so," was the drawled answer. "I'll take it for granted that everything is on the square, and if I find out that it's not—"

He broke off short, purposely. There was mystery here, and it intrigued him. Old Aberdeen, who now was staring absent-mindedly ahead, said nothing at all.

The house on the long inactive old Cross Bar ranch was a rambling, ramshackle structure of frame and adobe, and poorly furnished. A quite handsome but evidently much worried young woman came to the door to meet the two men. Aberdeen introduced her as his daughter, Julie, and asked her to feed the stranger first thing.

Fernander slumped to a threadbare couch in the livingroom. Julie brought food and water. When his thirst and hunger were satisfied, he stretched himself out on the couch, and slept.

HE WOKE soon to find himself in darkness; there were few lamps in the old house. Somewhere outside, Aberdeen was harshly commanding a horse to stand still and Julie chided him for the use of a sizzlingly sulphurous word. Fernander thought again of the object wrapped in a blanket in the buckboard; probably they were unloading it. *A dead man?* It was of about the size of a man. The idea seemed far-fetched.

Perhaps because his sleep that night was fitful, Jim Fernander was in no good humor the following day. He saw little of his aged host; Julie kept out of his way deliberately, though she saw that he had water and food.

It was in the afternoon that he became aware of a peculiar, low hissing sound that came from somewhere in the rear half of the ramshackle house. Curious, he went stealing down a narrow hallway, and drew up at a closed door to listen.

The hissing came from beyond that closed door. He put a hand toward the knob, and remembered that this would be prying. As he was about to turn away, Julie Aberdeen appeared beside him.

"Don't you ever, under any circumstances, go into that room," she warned in a voice that was very low and queerly bleak. "It's not that we don't trust you, though maybe there's no particular reason why we should."

He flushed under her straightforward gaze. Deep down he felt that this girl could not willingly be a party to wrong-doing of any kind. In his reply he stammered a little:

"Why, ma'am, I—I wouldn't go in there, of course. For a second, I forgot. The room ought to be kept locked, oughtn't it?"

"It is kept locked," she answered promptly. "This door and the outside door too, locked and barred. But if you're to work here, as Dad told me you were, you might find one of the doors open sometime. Dad said I was to warn you, and I have. Do you feel better?"

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"A big sight better. Any work you want me to do?"

"Nothing just now. Your job will be to keep strangers away, I've understood," Julie said.

She left him. He went back to the living-room.

After a few minutes there were footsteps on the front gallery, and a jingling of spurs. A huge, black-bearded, middle-aged man framed himself in the front doorway. He bent an inquisitive gaze upon Jim Fernander.

"Where's Aberdeen?" he asked gruffly.

"Maybe you won't mind tellin' me who it is that wants to know," serenely drawled Fernander.

"It's Thunderhead Tench, cowboy, who wants to know," came quickly and half savagely.

The younger man smiled a slow smile. "I've heard o' you, Thunderhead. The Tewa Indians named you that because you talked so loud and so much, and you took it as a compliment! You—"

He broke off as Aberdeen's daughter entered the room. She said coolly "Come in, Mr. Tench, and sit down, and I'll tell Dad you're here."

She hastened down the narrow hallway. The big, black-bearded man gave Jim Fernander a look that was fraught with acute dislike. Then he cocked an ear.

"What's that hissin' noise?" he muttered.

"Steam escapin'," Fernander guessed, incorrectly.

Tench shrugged. He said, "Aberdeen's a funny old nut."

THE hissing ceased. A moment, and the creaky voice of Lycurgus Aberdeen called Thunderhead Tench to the bottom of the front gallery steps. The two then walked off toward Tench's horse, a big bay with one white stocking, and the old man was talking excitedly in very low tones. Jim Fernander overheard something of that which the visitor had to say because the visitor spoke so loudly:

"It's a long time overdue, you know."

Aberdeen spoke then in tones of pleading. A little later, there drifted to Fernander's ears, in the big voice of Tench, this:

"What does it mean, Lycurgus, you drivin'

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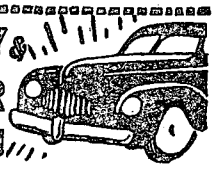

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around at night with a dead man in the buckboard? I've heard about it twice. Just what *is* the idea, Lycurgus?"

Aberdeen did not answer. Tench swore. Jim Fernander caught his silver-mounted six-shooter off the table and hurried outside.

"You, Thunderhead," and he spoke fast, "I'm here to protect these folks, and I sure am goin' to protect 'em. You crawl on that horse and lay down a long string o' tracks and start now!"

Tench's eyes blazed. But he said nothing. He climbed into the saddle and rode away. Aberdeen turned to Fernander.

"Don't make trouble with him, Jim, if you can help it. But you've got the right slant on things, Jim. You stick to me, and I'll give you *more money than you ever dreamt was in the world.*"

With that cryptic utterance, the old man went into the house. His daughter came out, and walked straight to Fernander.

"Be careful with Tench, Jim. We owe him—"

She caught herself too late. Fernander narrowed an eye.

"You can trust me, ma'am. How much do you owe Tench?"

Julie Aberdeen glanced toward the front door. Her companion noted the strange hissing sound again.

"I'd as well finish it, Jim. We owe Tench a thousand dollars. Borrowed money, and we've had it too long."

She tried to smile, barely managed it, and turned toward the house. It was then that Fernander began to really like Julie Aberdeen—perhaps because she seemed so forlorn and so lone in that moment.

On the next morning, he caught out and saddled one of the two Aberdeen horses, and entered upon his duties as sentinel and guard. It was almost noon when he spied a horseman approaching from southward. Before long he recognized the heavy figure of Thunderhead Tench. Since he blocked the narrow trail, Tench rode straight to him.

"Well, what now?" promptly inquired Thunderhead. His gun hand was ready.

With cool poise that seemed part of him, Fernander said, "I worked it out easy, big hombre. The way you looked at Julie yesterday told me plenty. You loaned Aberdeen money thinkin' you'd marry it back,

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didn't you? Well, I've decided to bet a thousand dollars on the Aberdeens, by payin' what they owe you; got the note with you, Thunderhead?"

"Happen to have the money on you?" Tench asked.

"Sure do," answered Fernander. It was in a belt next to his skin. "Where's the note?" with a hand close enough to the butt of his silver-mounted six-shooter.

"I've not got the note with me," said Tench.

"Then go back and get it," said Jim Fernander.

Thunderhead lifted his heavy brows. "I reckon it has never—er, occurred to you that old Lycurgus might be loco?"

"I don't believe he is," Fernander said. "He—"

Tench cut in: "Maybe I can tell you some things you don't know, amigo. Aberdeen was a desert gold-hunter for years and years, and I've thought a heap o' times that the sun musta twisted his mind a good deal. When Julie comes back from her aunt's in K. C., where she went to school, the two settles here on the deserted old Cross Bar. Purty soon Aberdeen comes to me in Redford City, where I own a saloon, and wants to borrow a thousand dollars. Not bein' a plumb fool, I ask him what he aims to do with it, and he won't tell me. But finally I gets this out of him:

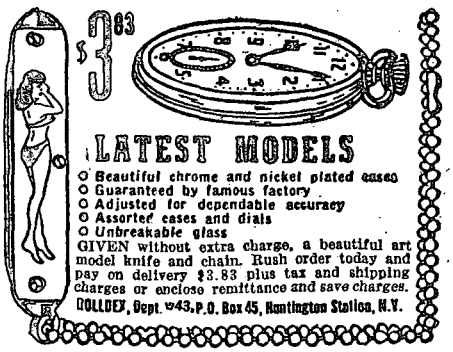
" 'I've stumbled on a tremendous big idea, Tench,' he says, 'and I want the money to tide me over until I've finished workin' the idea out. If the whole world knowed about it, it would be the greatest calamity you can think of,' he says, 'but to one man it's worth millions of dollars!'

"Now what do you make o' that, amigo?"

FERNANDER eyed Tench closely. In all probability, a lie would come easier than truth for Thunderhead, but truth rang in the voice of the big man now, and Fernander recognized it as truth. The reason for this was not deeply hidden. Tench had seen in the youthful stranger a power to reckon with. He had chosen to have Fernander as an ally rather than an enemy.

"I don't rightly know what to make of it," was the drawled response.

Tench narrowed an eye. "I don't either.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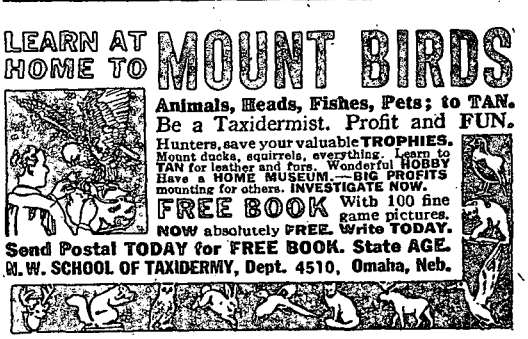
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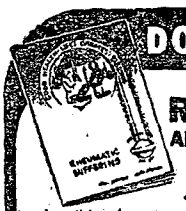

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Sure don't. But I was born to gamble, and suppose we stakes in together on the thing, whatever it happens to be. Eh?"

"Meanin' that we'll beat the old coot out o' whatever it is that he's got," bluntly said Fernander.

"Well," said Thunderhead, eyes turning bold. "I think I could ha' put it in nicer words, but you've just about hit the nail a square lick. I've got a strong hunch on that, and I always plays my hunches. What do you say?"

"Bring me the Aberdeen note," Fernander threw back, "that's what I say. And hustle. Start right now. If you're not gone in one minute, I'll shoot your hat off. Goin'?"

His hand was on the ivory butt of his gun. Tench glared, swung his white-stockinged bay around and rode toward Redford City. When he was out of strictly accurate six-shooter range, he half turned in his saddle to bellow a threat hoarsely:

"Take my advice, fella, and don't let another sun go down on you here!"

Jim Fernander's reply to that was prompt. He sent a .45 slug whistling over Tench's head. The big man found use for his spurs.

Apparently neither Aberdeen nor his daughter heard the shot, since they made no mention of it at noon when Fernander rode in. Julie's father was in high spirits. His eyes were as bright as new gold money, and he sang snatches of ancient songs while he was washing up for the mid-day meal.

The girl appeared to be happy because her sire was. After old Lycurgus had finished his dinner and gone back to his work behind locked and barred doors, Julie said to the stranger:

"You mustn't be surprised at anything that happens here, Jim. Don't be too curious, and don't be in a hurry to give your opinions. You'll understand sometime."

He'd never been more curious, but he made no mention of it. As he strode out of her presence he was once more aware of the mysterious hissing sound—

AT SUNDOWN Jim Fernander walked into the old ranch house livingroom to find the wizened, gray Lycurgus Aberdeen dancing his daughter around in a fever of delight. But there was a shadow, a dark

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shadow, on Julie's countenance. She gave the newcomer a look that puzzled him.

"Jim!" cried Aberdeen. "Jim, I've got it! At last, after a whole generation—we'll be rich—we'll have millions, millions! No more goin' hungry, and doin' without things; no more—" and here his squinted eyes twinkled with humor—"haulin' dead men around at night in a buckboard!"

He had seized Fernander's hand and was wringing it. The girl seemed ready to break. Fernander asked, "Can you tell me the secret now, old-timer?"

"Later, later," Aberdeen said. "Julie has got supper ready now. Let's fall to."

At the dining-table, Fernander muttered, "I've been wonderin': just how bad is the Tench hombre?"

Father and daughter exchanged glances. After a moment, the wizened Lycurgus said, "I don't like to talk about anybody to his back, after he's loant me money. Why, Jim?"

Fernander said, "Tench wanted me to team up with him and beat you out of whatever it is you've got."

The Aberdeens exchanged glances again. Aberdeen said, "We'll light no lamps in the house tonight, Julie. Jim, I hated to go to Thunderhead for a loan. But only a gambler would ha' let me have it, and so I went to Tench. Well, I'll soon be able to pay him back, and with interest that'll surprise him."

Old Lycurgus got up from the table very shortly after that. Nobody could have guessed how weary he was, and he had realized it himself only when his great task was finished. He gave instructions to the effect that Fernander was to guard the house from the outside, at least until midnight, and went off to bed. The girl tried to smile.

"With an almost full moon, there shouldn't be so much danger, Jim."

"Makes it easier to see skulkers, anyway," Jim said.

He went out to the front gallery steps and dropped to the upper one. He sat there as motionless and as silent as a sphinx until after the blood-orange moon had crawled above the horizon. The distant yapping of a coyote made him unaccountably lonesome.

Then a soft footfall beside him. Julie Aberdeen was sitting down nearby. He felt

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that he had to say something, and said this:

"How long ought it take Thunderhead Tench to ride to Redford City and back?"

"Five hours, about," answered the girl. Her voice was bleak, pinched. She hastened on, "Jim, you don't know, you couldn't know, what a tragedy this is! I'll have to tell you about it. I—"

But Fernander was now on his feet and no longer giving her any attention. His silver-mounted six-shooter was half out of the holster. Fresh as ever in his mind was Tench's warning: "Don't let another sun go down on you here!" He whispered to Julie:

"Get inside, quick!"

Mechanically she obeyed him. He stepped to the ground and ran, bent low, for a line of encroaching scrub fifty yards from the house. It made cover for him until he had reached a barrel-sized boulder at a point not far from where he'd had a glimpse of movement in the early moonlight.

He was closer to the enemy than he knew. After a minute of waiting, he overheard Tench: "No light in the house, and that means they're expectin' somethin'."

Thunderhead had spoken to a trio of Border hoodlums. Jim Fernander peered around the boulder, and his eyes made out the four, who stood just beyond a pair of needle-pointed agave plants. At once Fernander called:

"I'm no professional gun-scrapper, Thunderhead, but I can put up a gun-scrap when it's necessary. I take it you didn't come to bring the Aberdeen note, so I'm orderin' you and your rats to get yourselves away from here—fast!"

His six-shooter came up to put a shot close over their heads. He expected them to duck for cover immediately. Instead, there came a tremendous roar and four .45-calibre bullets, and two of the heavy slugs struck the boulder very close to him. Then Fernander began to shoot in earnest. He had the satisfaction of hearing an oath and a cry of pain.

When his weapon was empty, he stole back along the scrub line to reload. He had no more than finished that small task when his ears caught the rattle of hoofs. The sounds faded rapidly. Tench, himself a coward when the chips were down, had not picked his hoodlums well.

Fernander went back to the ramshackle ranchhouse. Julie met him at the front steps. She breathed, uneasily:

"The shooting didn't wake Dad, and usually he's a light sleeper. Will you see if there's anything wrong, Jim? Somehow I'm afraid."

HE HASTENED into the house, wiped a match into flame and lighted an oil lamp, with the lamp hastened into Aberdeen's bedroom. He saw instantly that the girl's fear had not been groundless.

The little, old gray man lay smiling in eternal triumph and eternal peace.

Two hours later a low feminine voice, quite steady, the voice of a soldier, came out of livingroom shadows: "It's a miracle, Jim, that he went at this time, nothing less than a miracle. He never could have got over knowing that he'd failed."

"Failed?"

"After years and years. Hunting gold in deserts for so long, it became an obsession. His mind had crumbled more or less, I'm sure. He'd decided that he could *make* gold! His latest formula was a good deal the same as one tried by the old alchemists. I want to bury the metal and crucible with him, Jim, but the acetylene gas tank ought to go back to Hanesville—"

A few days had passed when Jim Fernander called on Julie Aberdeen at the home of friends she had in town. She told him she meant to teach at school. He did not tell her that he had paid the Tench debt. He said:

"My yearly week or so of ramblin' is over now, ma'am, and I'm startin' for my home in Nueva Mex right off." No need to mention his big Lincoln County cow outfit. He reddened slightly. "I aim to come back here to see you, Julie, if you'll let me."

She smiled, and he knew then that everything was going to be all right.

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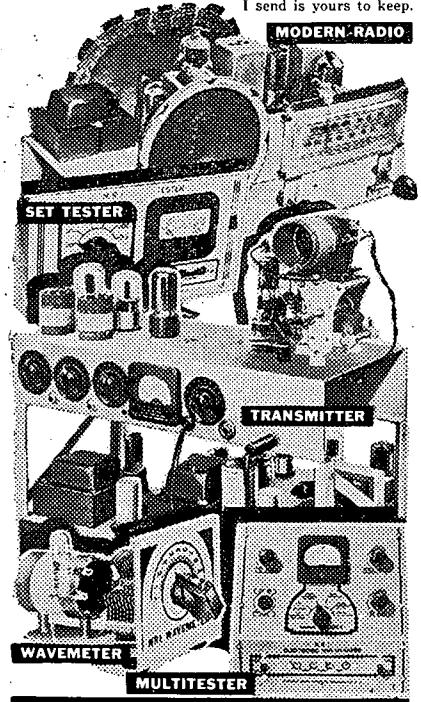

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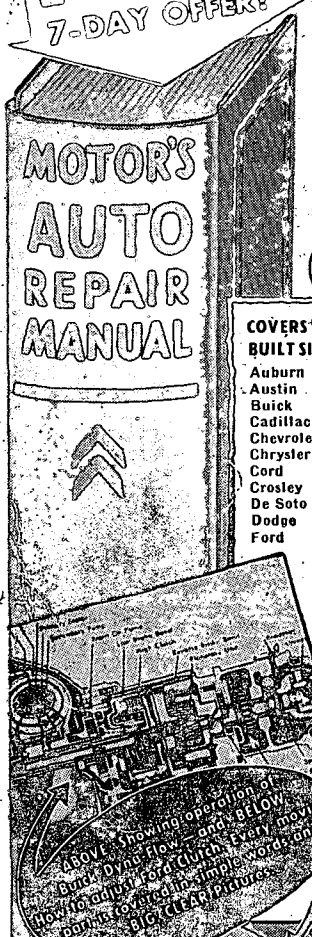

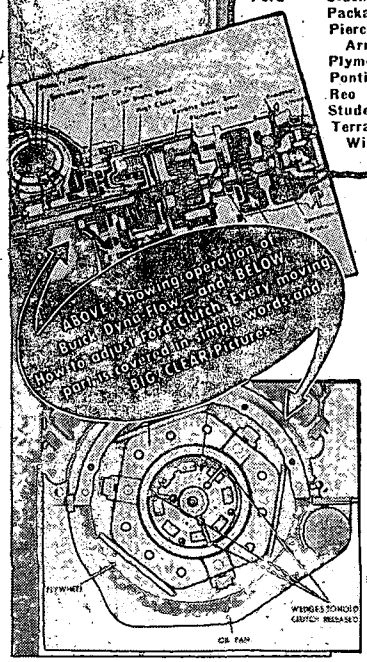
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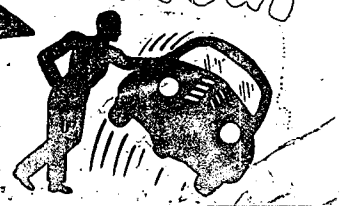

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